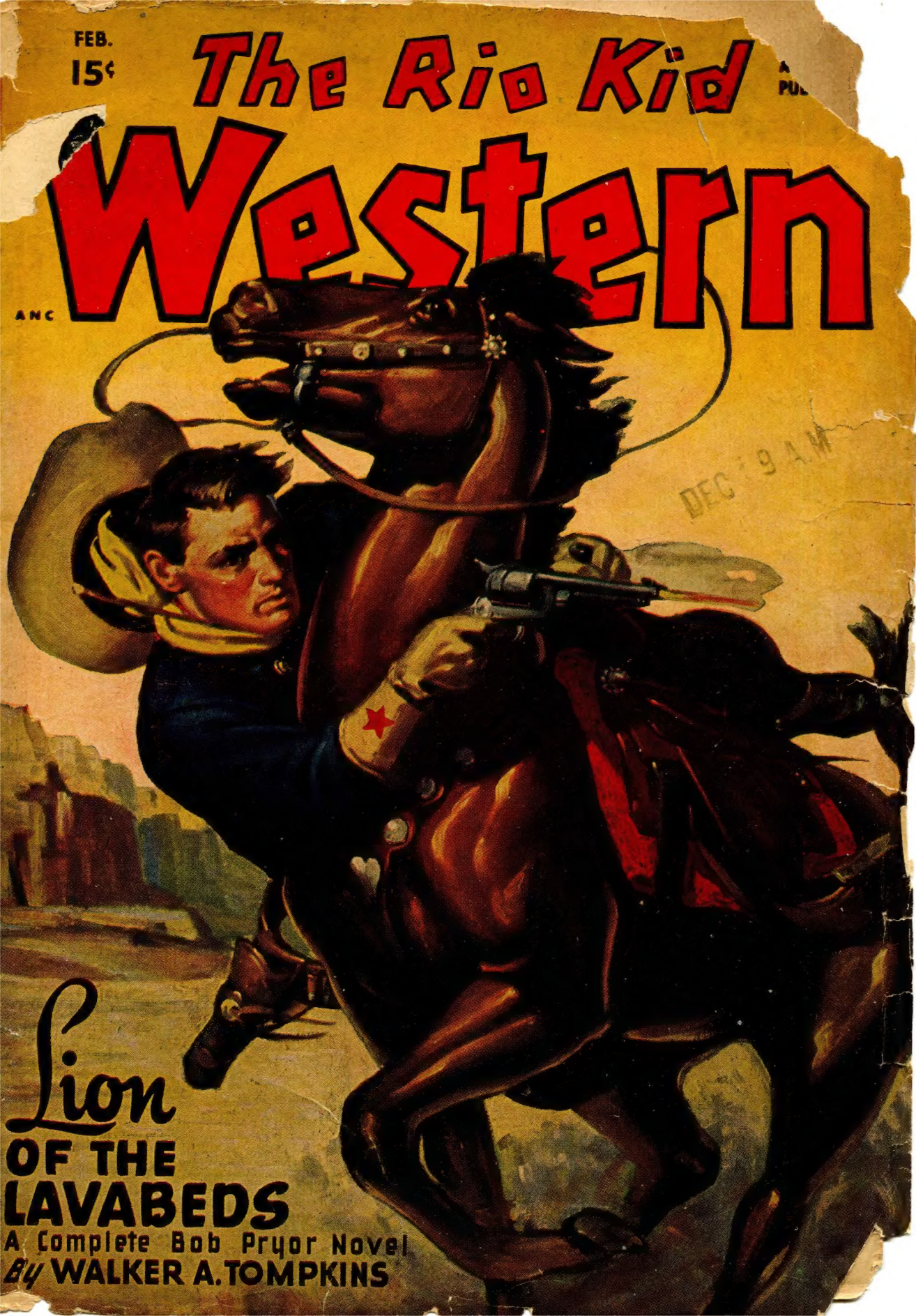
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The Rio Kid Western

Vol. XVI, No. 1 THRILLING PUBLICATION February, 1948

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LION OF THE LAVABEDS

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While the brutal Modoc War rages, Captain Pryor reverts to his soldiering days on a mission to end the slaughter and punish the renegades who are stirring up the Indians! Follow the Rio Kid as he battles to establish a reign of rangeland peace and justice! 13

COMPLETE NOVELET

THE LAST HALF MILE — *Allan K. Echols* 70

To redeem a promise he made to trustful settlers, Rick Tower calls for a gun-roaring bullet showdown against a tough and desperate crew of hired killers!

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NORTH TO THE ARKANSAS — *Robert Moore Williams* 61

Chuck Bledsoe was green and easily buncoed—but he sure learned things fast

DARK COMES THE NIGHT — *Gladwell Richardson* 86

When the Navajos attacked. Sergeant-major Riggs was ready to fight

STAGECOACH YULETIDE — *Johnston McCulley* 95

A white Christmas is almost spoiled because of the blood on the snow

AND

THE BUNKHOUSE — *Foghorn Clancy* 6

A department for readers conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

Plus "General E. R. S. Canby and the Modoc War," on Page 29, and Portrait and Biography of Captain Jack on Page 37

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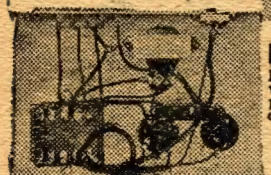

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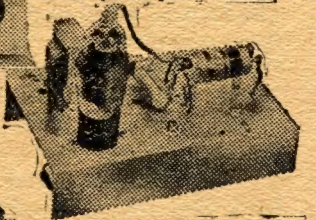

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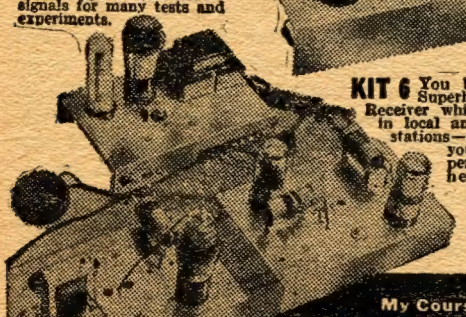

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HI, WADDIES, welcome again to the Bunkhouse. This old rangeland joint has housed many a cowboy, many a roving knight of the lariat and saddle, and many are the yarns that have been told within its walls.

When the cowboy is in the city you will see him seeking out the Western pictures at the movie theatres. He will also select Western stories at the newsstand. Maybe he wants to see just how the movie directors and the writers miss the real facts of the great West as it was and is. And lots of times in conversation among cowboys, the talk goes back to the early days of the West and tales are told of the old-timers, the pioneers.

A big percentage of the cowboys of today are descendants of those old pioneers of the frontier. The stories of the hardships, the struggles, the gunplay and the courage of the old pioneers have been handed down from one generation to another. That is the way we get them today, and that is the manner in which our yarns of the old Western frontier will come to others in the future.

Two Old Cronies

There are few of the old-timers left who were in the West when it was "wild and woolly." The ranks of the old-time trail drivers, and the old-time lawmen, are fast thinning out. One by one, the little band that is left ride on to the great beyond, and I will always be proud of the fact that I lived among some of them and met a lot of them personally.

In 1939, at the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show at Fort Worth, Texas, there were two distinguished guests of the management. These two old cronies sat together. Both were about eighty years of age then, and both were old-timers who had seen life at its roughest on the Western frontier, one as a cattleman and the other as a lawman.

The cattleman was Ab Blocker. He was the originator of the famous X I T brand, a brand that was burned into the hides of over a million head of stock. Now the once famous ranch, that comprised nearly three million acres, has been cut up into small ranches and farms and has been sold off.

Here's the way it came about that Blocker originated the brand. When Texas wanted to build its capitol building, the great state found itself with a lot of land but no money, so they advertised for a party or parties to build a capitol building and take pay in land. The Capitol Land and Cattle Syndicate was then organized in Chicago. They financed the building of the capitol and for their pay Texas gave them some three and a half million acres of land. This land covered ten counties in Texas.

It was natural, after acquiring all that land, that the syndicate would want to go into the cattle business, as the land was at that time good for nothing except cattle grazing, so the syndicate selected an old cattleman from the Indian Territory, known as Barbecue Campbell, made him foreman of the ranch and gave him orders to buy cattle with which to stock it.

Trail Boss

It so happened that Ab Blocker was commissioned to act as trail boss for the first herd of cattle driven to the ranch, and when

(Continued on page 8)

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

he arrived with the cattle, the syndicate had not named the ranch or selected or registered a brand and neither had Barbecue.

Ab and Barbecue fell to discussing a brand. Barbecue wanted one that would be hard for brand-blotters to work over, for he knew that when so much land was stocked it would be impossible to ride herd on all the cattle. Ab Blocker began drawing or making out possible brands with a stick in the sand. All at once he looked at Barbecue and said: "Let's see, this darned spread takes in ten counties, don't it," and when Campbell replied in the affirmative, Ab marked with his stick in the sand the three letters, X I T, the X for the Roman numeral of ten, the I for in, and the T for Texas, meaning Ten Counties in Texas. Then Ab showed how hard it would be for brand blotters to work over that brand and Campbell adopted the brand, sent some cowboys in to have the branding irons made at the blacksmith shop, registered the brand and had Ab Blocker brand the first animal with the new mark.

Now each year at Dalhart, Texas, near where the headquarters of the great ranch once was, the old time punchers and others who worked on the ranch before it was sold off, hold an X I T Reunion. Ab Blocker rode on to the last roundup several years ago.

Captain Hughes

I had known Ab Blocker long before he was a guest of the Fat Stock Show, and while I had known of the other old-timer I had never had the pleasure of meeting him before. He was Captain John R. Hughes, former Texas Ranger, and although 84 years old he was as straight as an arrow, keen of eye and always alert to what was taking place about him.

I found him, like the majority of those really great old-timers, willing to talk about things that had happened back in the early days of the West, seemingly glad to tell of the exploits and courage of others, but reluctant to say a word about the part he played himself.

They were nearly all that way. They would brag about the bravery of some fellow who was with them at the time some great gun-battle took place, but if you believed what

(Continued on page 10)

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 8)

little they said about their own part in such affairs, they just happened to be around and that was about all.

I have also noticed, in talking to those old pioneers in years gone by, that when one of them is in a reminiscing mood, there is a twinkle in his eye. He seems to be living again those old days, and seems glad that he lived in that era, and looks as though he would like to go back and live it all over again!

Captain John R. Hughes passed out of this life three months ago. Nelson C. Nye has paid an eloquent tribute to him in a recent issue of *Hoofs and Horns*, and I am going to quote from it. Nye titled the article "'Johnny Hughes is Gone." Like others who knew Captain Hughes, Nye called him Johnny on account of his smile and his sunny disposition. Here's the story:

The other day a tired old man pulled off his boots and went upstairs. He was in his nineties. That man was John R. Hughes, who in his time was the most talked-of man around the campfires of the cow camps, a man whose exploits read like legend. He lived in the West when the West was wild, when toughness and lawlessness paid big dividends. A mild-mannered man, always courteous and soft-spoken, with a smile that gleamed brightest when the going got rough, John R. Hughes was the curse of the evil-doer. He didn't drink, smoke or gamble—except with his life in the line of duty. John Hughes was a Texas Ranger!

In twenty-eight years of service he never lost a prisoner. He joined the Rangers in '87 and was two years later made a Captain. He probably kicked down more doors and went through more smoke than any other star-packer in Texas. Yet he never forgot he was a gentleman. He saw most of his service along the Rio Grande; he used a .45-70 and shot from the hip, and he didn't often have to shoot more than once.

He came from Illinois and turned up as a boy

(Continued on page 104)

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EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

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Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a nonprofit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

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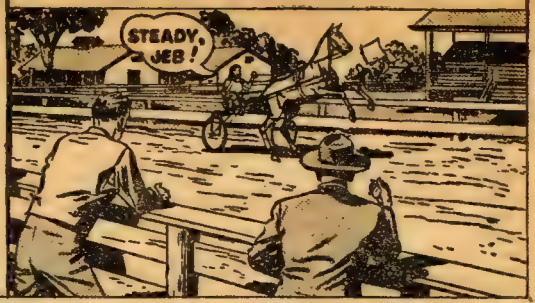
Sincere men and women, in search of the truth —those who wish to fit in with the ways of the world—are invited to write for a complimentary copy of the sealed booklet, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how to contact the librarian of the archives of AMORC for this rare knowledge. This booklet is not intended for general distribution; nor is it sent without request. It is therefore suggested that you write for your copy to Scribe J. M. B.

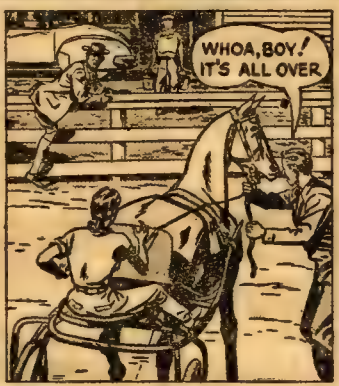
The ROSICRUCIANS
[AMORC]
San Jose California

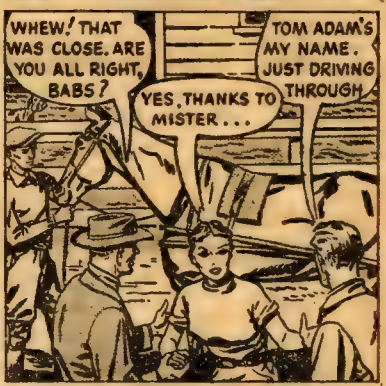
TOM STOPPED THE RUNAWAY AND THEN . . .

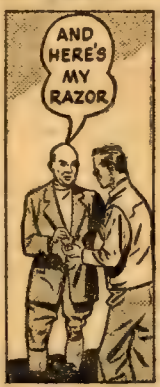
WATCHED BY HER DAD AND A PASSERBY, "BABS" WEBB IS GIVING HER FAVORITE TROTTER HIS MORNING WORKOUT WHEN . . .



THE FEAR-CRAZED ANIMAL SNAPS A REIN AND GALLOPS BLINDLY AT THE FENCE







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As the two horsemen rode in, the Indians were whirling to retreat (CHAP. I)

LION OF THE LAVABEDS

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

When the brutal Modoc War rages, the Rio Kid reverts to his soldiering days on a mission to end the slaughter and punish the villainous renegades stirring up the redskins!

CHAPTER I

Modoc Massacre

IT WAS a small band of Indians, no larger than a scouting party, and it moved furtively through the undergrowth above the greening acres of Blake's Farm on ponies whose hoofs were encased in buckskin pouches to deaden the sound of their passage.

Daubs of ochre and iron oxide on their cheekbones and unwhiskered jaws branded them as renegade Modocs, though the traditional hunting ground of their tribe was in Klamath Lake Basin, north of the staggered skyline of the Siskiyou Range.

Only Kintupash, their chieftain, wore the habiliments of his ancestral Modocs. They were a fringed jacket of parfleche leather, with an elkhide baldric slant-

ing from shoulder to thigh and sagging under the weight of an iron tomahawk, a sheathed scalping blade, and a rusty cap-and-ball pistol with a clover-leaf cylinder which had once been the property of a wagonmaster bound for California's gold fields with a Conestoga caravan.

Rawhide pants, thonged leggings and ankle-high moccasins completed Kintupash's costume. A lone eagle feather jutted from his unkempt, short-bobbed hair as an insigne of rank.

The other warriors in his scouting party were as ragtag as the motley cavalcade of stolen ponies they forked, wearing as they did the shirts and pants and scuffed boots of hapless Oregonian pioneers whose scalps now adorned their tomahawk handles. Unlike their dramatic, warbonneted cousins in remoter parts of the continent, such as the Sioux or the Mohawks or the Shawnee, these Modocs were a disheveled, dirty, flea-ridden band.

On the crest of a rise where the timber thinned, Kintupash lifted an arm in signal for his warriors to dismount and slither through the knee-high grass to a vantage point which gave them a view of the settler's cabin in the clearing below.

It was a pastoral scene, deceptively beautiful, giving no hint of the blood-thirsty, predatory men lurking at its borders. Far to the south the westering sun rays touched the brooding twin peaks of Shasta with rose and lavender, glistening off lesser snow fields of the Siskiyous.

UNBROKEN forest land stretched to horizons so remote they tired the eye and thrilled the spirit of the most jaded hunter. Only the log cabin and the brush corral down in the meadow hinted that this was the spring of '73 and that white man had discovered this evergreen paradise hundreds of miles north of the California gold fields.

"She visits the paleface who built yonder cabin, Kintupash," spoke the petty chieftain whose name was known to the bloody history of Oregon as Schonchin. "Winema, daughter of your father's brother, who sleeps in the teepee of the hairy-faced one who speaks our tongue."

Kintupash's obsidian-black eyes glittered with a hatred which had been responsible for the reign of terror now raging throughout Southern Oregon. To the hated whites, Kintupash was known as "Captain Jack" and an indictment for his capture had been issued by a civil court in Oregon, charging him with inciting the Modoc War which had run its bloody course through the winter just passed. Kintupash, who had carved himself a niche in frontier history as the "Lion of the Lavabeds," that inpenetrable *pedregal* sprawled below the California border where Captain Jack and his Modoc tribesmen had taken refuge.

Captain Jack's beady gaze moved in keen appraisal of the stockaded cabin at the foot of the slope. Smoke curled lazily from a mud-and-wattle chimney. Two children, mere toddlers not long long out of swaddling clothes, played inside the stockade, visible through the open gates. A farmer was plowing along a meandering creek.

Somewhere inside that cabin, consorting with the sodbuster who had founded his little homestead here in the Siskiyou uplands, would be Winema, the squaw who served as an interpreter for the blue-coated soldiery at Fort Klamath. As such, Captain Jack considered Winema to be a traitor to her race, a squaw whose scalp would soon adorn his trophy-hung baldric. It was doubly galling to the chief to have Schonchin remind him that Winema was his own blood cousin.

Vengeance had been the motive which had drawn Captain Jack out of the Lavabeds and drawn him to this isolated settlement in the tall timber. Blake's Ranch it was called, and of itself constituted no great prize for Captain Jack's Modocs. A half-dozen scalps, a few horses, perhaps a few knives and guns—no more.

"We attack now," Captain Jack grunted in the guttural undertones of his Modoc tongue. "We burn the cabin and the haystack. Winema and the paleface she calls husband must die by my hand. It is understood?"

Justice Rests on the Shoulders of Bob Pryor!

The Modocs nodded, gripping their scalping knives and their gun stocks with an impatience not long to be held in curb.

Like wraiths skulking through the tall grass, Captain Jack and his dozen-odd warriors moved back to where their ponies waited. A quick blow without warning, the flash of a torch and a swift thunder of gunshots, and they would be well on their way back to the Lavabeds before nightfall. And the blood of the traitress Winema would stain Captain Jack's hands as proof of his revenge. . . .

Jed Blake was driving his plow horse up from the creek when the attack came. Without warning, the edge of the forest came alive with whooping red devils and his speared horse was spilling its entrails over the new furrows before the red-whiskered pioneer had time to unsling his musket.

Blake's shout of warning reached the camp where his wife Jennie was preparing a meal for their guests, Winema Riddle and her white husband, Frank. The shout was cut off by an arrow which winged its way from a war bow to imbed itself in the sodbuster's throat.

It was Frank Riddle, the Fort Klamath interpreter, who sprinted across the stockade to swing shut and bolt the big gates, even as the Modoc massacre party swarmed across the clearing behind smoke-gouting rifles. There were eight souls in the beleaguered cabin, only three adults among them. Frank Riddle was the only man.

BOB PRYOR

By the time Riddle had gathered the Blake children safely inside the log farmhouse, the sod roof was blazing where Modoc arrows, dipped in bear grease and rolled with gunpowder before being ignited with flint and steel, had sped like fiery comets over the pointed logs of the protecting stockade.

WITHIN ten minutes at the most, the pole rafters would cave in over the heads of those in the cabin, fac-

ing them with the dilemma of being burned alive or being forced out into the open to be cut down by the marauding Modocs who were now circling the stockade on their fleet ponies.

"We are doomed, Mrs. Blake," Riddle said gravely, as he stood beside the Modoc woman who was his wife. "No one could know that the Modocs would venture this far from the Lavabeds, knowing that the Army has surrounded their hideout."

Tears misted the pioneer woman's eyes as she tried to quiet her sobbing children. With her husband scalped and mutilated out at the edge of the clearing, death no longer held any terrors for Blake's widow.

"Wait!" cried Winema, from her station by one of the rifle ports in the log walls. "Captain Jack is withdrawing! Something is scaring the Indians away!"

Riddle and Mrs. Blake rushed to the loophole. Winema's words were true. The whooping Modoc braves, instead of closing in for the kill, were galloping toward the hemming forest in panicky retreat.

Then, to the ears of the stunned prisoners under the burning room, came a dull rumble of many hoofbeats. Out of the clearing to the south, from the direction of the trail leading to Mount Shasta and the southern settlements, rode two horsemen firing at the retreating Indians and spurring toward the stockaded enclosure.

Frank Riddle was at the gate sliding back the bars when he saw that one of the riders wore the blue uniform with yellow outseamed pants legs indicating the U.S. Cavalry. His companion was a handsome, swarthy-faced young Mexican wearing the high-peaked sombrero

Before Fiske could turn the cylinder, the Rio Kid's blazing .45 caught him in the chest (CHAP. XI)

and bannering rainbow-hued serape of a California *hidalgo* from old Mexico.

"How many of you here?" demanded the blue-coated rider, on whose shoulders were the bars of an Army captain.

"Five children, two women and myself," Riddle answered, cocking his head to catch the fading rumble of hoofs off beyond the clearing. "You are bringing a detachment of cavalry?"

The young captain flung himself off his lather-flecked mouse-dun cavalry horse and shook his head.

"That was a bluff to scare off those redskins," he said grimly. "My friend Celestino Mireles here and myself stampeded a herd of hosses we found grazin' down the creek bottom in the hopes it would deceive them Modocs. I am Captain Bob Pryor, heading for Twenty-first Infantry headquarters on special duty."

The women and children gathered around Riddle as the interpreter stared at Pryor, comprehension dawning slowly in his eyes.

"Then—you two are alone? The two of you scared off that massacre attack?"

Celestino Mireles' dusky face was grave as he nodded.

"Eet ees true, senor. And eef the *Indios* circle back, they weel find out the treek. We must get away from thees *casa* pronto or we weel lose our hair, *es verdad!*"

CHAPTER II

Rio Kid's Mission

TIME was precious. Pryor had gambled his own scalp on the off chance that the small party of Indians which he had caught in the act of attacking Blake's Farm would hear the stampeding herd of horses and, catching sight of his own cavalry uniform, reach the conclusion that Army reinforcements were providentially close at hand to outnumber the attackers.

Pryor's scheme had worked. The Modocs had withdrawn at the first glimpse of his uniform, no doubt believing that another troop of cavalry was coming up from Camp Bidwell to augment the Army laying siege to the Lavabeds. Celestino Mireles, in his Mexican costume, had probably been mistaken for a California scout leading the soldiers northward.

But if the Modocs sent a scout back to reconnoiter, Bob Pryor knew his coup might easily be turned into a disaster. There was not even time enough for Mrs. Blake to rush back into the blazing cabin and recover a few precious personal belongings.

Riddle and his Indian wife had their saddle horses inside the stockade. The Blakes' stock, on the other hand, were among the animals pasturing down on the creek, which Pryor and Mireles had stampeded.

With feverish haste, Pryor ordered the children mounted, together with their mother, on the four available horses. Then, the saddlers carrying double, the fugitives galloped away from the blazing cabin and vanished into the forest bordering the creek which bisected the clearing.

Out of view of Modoc scouts, Pryor and Celestino shook out lariats and headed downstream, returning shortly with two ponies each from Blake's scattered remuda. The pioneer's children, even the toddlers, were at home on horseback.

"The nearest refuge is the sawmill camp, owned by Miles Elkorn, Captain," Frank Riddle reported. "We will be safe from Captain Jack there. We can reach Elkorn's by moonrise."

They headed north, traveling by game trails which Winema, the squaw, as leader of the cavalcade picked out. The children's horses were spaced between the adult riders, with Captain Bob Pryor bringing up the rear. They rode without speech, pushing their horses with the utmost caution over the pine-needle carpet of the trail, realizing that Captain Jack and his raiding party might well be lurking in ambuscade at any bend of the trail.

The imposed silence of their getaway flight prevented Riddle or the Blake family from asking the questions which tormented them regarding the identity of their rescuers.

Elsewhere in the West, Captain Robert Pryor was better known as the "Rio Kid." He was a husky, handsome man in the prime of life, riding the saddle with military erectness which dated back to his Army service in the Civil War.

Born and bred on the banks of the Rio Grande, Pryor had volunteered for duty with the Union Army at the outbreak of the great conflict between the States, becoming chief scout for such noted generals as Sheridan and Custer, Meade and Sherman.

After the victory at Appomattox, the Rio Kid had returned to his parents' ranch in Texas. There he had found that tragedy had visited his stamping grounds during his absence, Border bandits having wiped out his family and ruined the home spread. This crushing blow had altered the course of Pryor's life, and had been the motivating force back of his pledge to wage relentless war against lawlessness in all its forms.

Celestino Mireles, his Mexican *compadre,* had a similar background of family tragedy. He had been Pryor's inseparable companion since the long-past day when the Rio Kid had rescued the Mexican youth from Border renegades who had slain his father and father in their *hacienda.*

No mere coincidence of destiny had brought the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles into this isolated pocket of California's rugged Siskiyous today, in time to thwart Captain Jack's vicious attempt to massacre his cousin, Winema. They rode on Army orders.

THE Modoc War had been raging on the Oregon-California border since the previous autumn, the outgrowth of the Modocs' vow to wipe out the white settlers of southern Oregon.

From what little the Rio Kid had learned of the campaign, things had been going badly for the Army during the past winter and spring. Led by their crafty chieftain, Captain Jack, the Modocs had consolidated their forces and withdrawn into the vast *pedregal* region below Tule Lake known as the Lavabeds.

There, standing off superior odds, the Modocs had defied every assault of American cavalry, infantry, and artillery units. As a result, no less a personage than President Ulysses S. Grant, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, had dispatched Captain Robert Pryor to the West with orders to assist in breaking the deadlock between the Modocs and the attacking military forces.

According to the orders in the Rio Kid's tunic, he was to report on arrival in Northern California at the outpost run by the American sawyer, Miles Elkorn. For that reason, the Kid was doubly anxious to reach the end of tonight's getaway trail.

Strangely enough, the Rio Kid had heard of his trail guide, Winema, by reputation. The Modoc woman's fame had spread far abroad through the land. Pryor had heard her name mentioned frequently in Monterey and San Francisco within the past fortnight.

Daughter of a Modoc medicine man, wife of the white interpreter who had greeted Pryor at the entrance of Blake's stockade, Winema was already fast becoming a legend, known for her exploits in behalf of the white settlers as the "Oregon Pocahontas."

It struck Pryor as an odd vagary of Fate that his introduction to the Modoc War should have been through Winema herself.

As they rode through the gathering darkness of the fir timberland, the Rio Kid peered along the file of jogging horses to study Winema. He saw that she was as beautiful as her name, a charming specimen of Indian womanhood at its finest.

Clad in beaded doeskin blouse and skirt, Winema rode her leggy blue roan pony without benefit of saddle, her youthful body swaying to the mount's gait with the lithe ease of a born rider. Her raven-black hair hung in twin braids down her back, combed back off a copper-complexioned face that was molded in the same clean-cut lines which characterized Indians of the Great Plains, and rarely found among the decadent coastal tribes.

Her husband, Frank Riddle, was a powerfully built man in his early forties. Strength of character was evident in his distinguished features and dignified bearing which automatically discounted the stigma usually attached to an inter-racial marriage.

Even without knowing Riddle's contribution to the Modoc War, the Rio Kid knew Winema's husband did not merit the slur denoted by the popular term "squawman." Riddle had wed a thoroughbred, whatever the color of her skin or the savagery of her ancestors.

Night fell ebon black over the Siskiyous. The procession of horses moved in a compact formation along the tenuous forest trails. A sickle of lemon-yellow moon was cruising over the lofty broken crown of Mount Shasta, remote in the indigo distance, when they emerged on a logged-off mountain valley to see the lights of Miles Elkorn's sawmill camp twinkling in the distance.

Sentries hailed them from the blockhouse bastions built on the four corners of Elkorn's stockade, as the file of riders drew closer, threading through the stump-dotted flats in the moonlight.

"Winema, northbound from Blake's Farm!" the Modoc girl answered the challenge as they reined up before the closed gates of Elkorn's lumber camp. "Captain Jack attacked the farm this afternoon and killed Mr. Blake in cold blood! We seek shelter."

The big gates swung open to admit the riders to the sawmill compound. They were quickly surrounded by a swarm of buskskin-clad trappers, mountain men and loggers. Mrs. Blake and her little family were well-known here and the news of the homesteader's brutal killing came as a stunning shock to the whiskered frontiersmen who gathered to welcome the survivors.

AFTER their horses had been turned over to one of Elkorn's hostlers, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles were approached by a towering giant of a man who wore a blanket-lined mackinaw, raccoon cap and high-laced mountaineer boots.

"I'm Miles Elkorn," the big man said with bluff camaraderie, shaking Pryor's hand. "Riddle tells me yuh're Captain Pryor?"

The Rio Kid nodded, appraising the famous California lumber king. Elkorn wore long cinnamon-red Dundreary whiskers which partially offset the smallpox scars which disfigured his otherwise aristocratic face. Elkorn's deep-set eyes were overshadowed by craggy brows threaded with premature gray.

"That's right," Pryor acknowledged, and introduced Celestino. "My orders from President Grant were to report to you, Elkorn. I understand yuh're to conduct me to the commanding officer in charge of the Modoc campaign."

Elkorn's granite-gray eyes were somber.

"Things ain't goin' well, Captain," he said. "Captain Jack is lickin' the pants off the whole U. S. Army, to date. We need a man of yore caliber here. But come inside. Some roast venison and California pheasant should be welcome under yore belt, eh?"

After a night's sleep, Pryor and Celestino, accompanied by Elkhorn, breakfasted in the black hour before dawn. They had reached the marshy rim of Tule Lake, three miles from the sawmill, by the time sunrise flung its gaudy banners over the Lavabeds. Their host, Miles Elkorn, had insisted on getting an early start for the reason that the commanding officer of the armies assembled in Northern California was rarely at his headquarters after ten o'clock in the morning.

Tule Lake's blue-gray waters were like crinkled parchment under the light breeze which swept off the snow-covered Siskiyous. Across the wildfowl-dotted lake, the Rio Kid could see the frowning *pedregal* of the Lavabeds sloping down to meet the water, where mountains of molten rock had congealed at the water's edge in millenniums past.

Even at a distance, Pryor realized the tough campaign which the Americans faced in attempting to rout the Modocs from their craggy lair. A high plateau, literally a frozen sea of petrified volcanic stone, the Lavabeds were perhaps the most inaccessible area of badlands in the entire West.

The sun was an hour high when Pryor and Mireles topped a rise and caught sight of the Stars and Stripes floating above a tent city in the distance.

"Field headquarters of Brevet Major Tracy Williard's Twenty-first U.S. Infantry," Miles Elkorn explained. "The staffs of attached complements are here —the California Volunteer Rifles, a few howitzer batteries from Camp Harney, Oregon, and the First Brigade of Oregon Mounted Militia."

Pryor nodded thoughtfully. A powerful concentration of troops had been massed here at the edge of the Lavabeds for months, only to chalk up defeat after defeat at the hands of Captain Jack and a band of warriors numbering not more than six hundred. Scanning the Lavabeds in the background, the Rio Kid saw where a million soldiers could easily be slaughtered in an effort to storm the Modoc's redoubt.

Twenty minutes later a blue-uniformed sentry challenged them, saluted as he caught sight of Pryor's bars, grinned a friendly greeting to Miles Elkorn, and admitted them to the headquarters parade ground.

They dismounted in front of a tent which, because of the flagstaff at its rear, they knew to be Major Williard's headquarters. Miles Elkorn approached an aide who emerged from the tent and after a moment's conversation, turned to the Rio Kid and Celestino.

"We're in luck, gentlemen," the lumber king said. "Major Williard has not yet ridden out to the battlefield. He'll see yuh, Captain Pryor."

Removing his campaign hat with its crossed-sabers insignia of the U.S. Cavalry, the Rio Kid ducked through the fly of the tent and came stiffly to

attention as he faced a tall, barrel-chested officer seated behind a table spread with battle maps.

"Captain Robert Pryor reportin' for special duty, sir," the Rio Kid said. "Here are my orders from President Grant."

CHAPTER III

Suicide Assignment

BREVET Major Tracy Williard's work-gaunted face was revitalized as he came around from behind the table and shook the Rio Kid's hand, then accepted the envelope from Washington, D.C.

"I have been expecting you, Captain," Williard said. "I have heard a great deal of your exploits in the past. It may surprise you to know that the entire outcome of this campaign may rest on your shoulders alone, sir."

Pryor seated himself in a canvas-bottomed field chair as Williard went back and began shuffling papers behind his desk. Williard was a battle-scarred old veteran of Bull Run and Gettysburg whose bearded face reminded Pryor of General U. S. Grant himself.

"Assuming that you are not cognizant with the background of the Modoc campaign," Williard began once more in his brusk military fashion, "I shall risk boring you by bringing you up-to-date on developments. First, however—what is your attitude where Indian fighting is concerned, Captain Pryor?"

The Rio Kid hesitated. He was friendly toward the redmen and Indian campaigns were somewhat out of his line.

"Well," he said tentatively, "the Great White Father back in Washington hasn't a spotless record insofar as his treatment of the redman is concerned, Major. The Indians were here before the whites came, and in many cases they've been treated pretty shabby, what with broken treaties and the like. For a man who has dedicated his life to help downtrodden people and persecuted folks I ain't exactly what yuh'd call an Indian-hater."

CELESTINO MIRELES

Major Williard flushed before Pryor's blunt frankness.

"Well spoken, son," he grinned. "However, you need feel no compunction about assisting in crushing these Modoc scalp-hunters. The Modocs are the scourge of the West, feared and hated by even their neighboring tribes—the Klamaths, the Umatillas, the Me-Yuks."

The Rio Kid listened with respectful attention as Williard unfolded one of the bloodiest chapters in the history of the winning of the West.

History supported his assertion that since the earliest period of Oregon's settlement, the Modocs, or *maklaks* as they called themselves, had been noted for their warlike ways and the extreme cruelties which they inflicted on their captives.

In 1865, the Modoc and Klamath tribes had voluntarily ceded their lands to the United States, which were surveyed and thrown open to emigrants eager to leave the East, then in the throes of the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. But the Modocs had broken their solemn treaty with the whites by bolting their reservation. At the instigation of Chief Kintupash, now popularly known as Captain Jack, the Modocs had gone on a red warpath which threatened the white settlers with extermination.

Seeing Oregon's future in peril, agents at the Camp Yainax reservation

had appealed to the Army for help. The noted General E. R. S. Canby, in command of the Columbia Department, had arrived on the scene with his troops. In their opening engagement with Captain Jack's band, General Canby had been defeated with heavy losses, but had forced Captain Jack and his allied bands to withdraw into the fastnesses of the California Lavabeds.

"A month or so ago, on April eleventh," Major Williard explained, "a Peace Commission was formed with General Canby at its head. They met Captain Jack and his sub-chiefs in a pow-wow, hoping to smoke the peace pipe. During the council, Captain Jack drew a pistol and shot General Canby in the back. All of the Commission would have lost their lives had it not been for the quick work of Winema, the Modoc squaw who was acting as an interpreter."

The Rio Kid nodded.

"I have met Winema and Frank Riddle," he said. "She says that Captain Jack regards her as a traitor to her tribe."

"Perhaps, from his viewpoint," Williard agreed. "Personally, I believe Winema is working for the good of her people. The tribe is mesmerized by Captain Jack's malevolent personality. This is a big land, Winema feels, with ample room for whites and reds to live together peaceably. Winema is a fine woman. She is loved and respected by the majority of the Modocs."

MAJOR WILLIARD shuffled through his maps and papers. He appeared like a man aged and broken before his time.

"It is nearly June," he said, "and frankly, Captain Pryor, the situation is deadlocked. The most we can say is that we have the Modoc tribe surrounded in the Lavabeds, making it impossible for them to get out."

The Rio Kid kept his thoughts to himself. Remembering Captain Jack's abortive raid of yesterday, he had reason to doubt that the Modocs were as bottled up as Major Williard would have him believe.

"The Modocs could live in the Lavabeds indefinitely," Williard said. "Winema tells me they have an artesian well —they call it the 'Fountain of the Gods' —which gives them an inexaustible supply of water. Now Washington is howling for action. I expect momentarily to be relieved of my command.

"Our troops' morale is high. They want to avenge General Canby's brutal murder. Volunteers from both Oregon and California are fighting with the regular Army. But we are getting nowhere."

The Rio Kid leaned forward to study the sketchy maps of the Lavabeds. It was a wild, rugged land, as he already knew, forty-five hundred feet above sea level, crisscrossed with deep canyons and honeycombed with innumerable caves and subterranean river beds. The Modocs could move at will through the Lavabeds, secure even against the shellfire of American artillery.

"Sir, how about starvin' 'em out?" he suggested.

Williard grinned bleakly. "That, Pryor, is the crux of the whole problem. Captain Jack is getting help from unknown sources. Quartermaster supply wagons have been robbed—we believe by white renegades—and the rifles, blankets, food and other supplies those wagons contained are being smuggled through our siege lines."

"Then these white renegades must be caught!"

"Precisely. Until Captain Jack's source of supplies is cut off and the traitors who are helping him prolong this useless war are brought to justice, we can't hope to bring the Modoc campaign to a conclusion. I don't mind admitting that I am at the end of my wits, Captain Pryor."

"Where," asked the Rio Kid, "do I come in, Major?"

Williard unlocked a field safe and drew out an envelope with the red borders which designated it as being Top Secret.

He handed the missive to the young Texan with an expression which defined better than words his very great reluctance at having to give the Rio Kid his official orders.

"Your mission sounds simple enough," the Gettysburg veteran said, "but I feel it only fair to warn you that President Grant has dispatched you out here on—on a suicide assignment. You will read these orders, memorize them, and then I shall destroy them."

The Rio Kid felt his pulses quicken as he read:

SUBJECT: Reconnaissance mission to Lavabeds.
FROM: Commanding General, Dept. of Columbia.
TO: Captain Robert Pryor, Cavalry Corps.

1. You are hereby instructed to penetrate the Lavabeds and report to this command the exact location of Captain Jack's supply depots and the number of warriors, including noncombatants and casualties, which he commands.

2. You are to conduct personal intelligence investigation into identity of renegades believed to be smuggling ammunition and food supplies to Modocs.

The orders were signed on behalf of the now-dead General E. R. S. Canby, commander of the Columbia Department, by his adjutant, Captain Tracy Williard, who had since been given an honorary brevet commission to give him adequate command of field operations in the Lavabeds campaign.

"Am I to have a free hand in carryin' out this assignment?" the Rio Kid inquired, handing the orders back to his superior. Williard nodded. "Good! First, then, I aim to investigate folks in this territory who have the means to carry supplies to Captain Jack, sir. That would probably be a trader who can get hold of wagons, wheelwrights, and hay and grain for his teams."

Pryor leaned over the table, studying a map of the region.

"In other words," he explained, "I want to know where the nearest town is, where I might find a man who would stand to make a profit sellin' supplies to the Modocs."

Major Williard tapped a finger on one of his maps.

"That's easy. Stateline, here, is the only settlement in this area. It's a way point on the wagon route between Yreka and the Rogue River Valley settlements."

CONSULTING the chart, Pryor saw that Stateline was situated on a bend of Lost River.

It straddled the Oregon-California line and was roughly fifteen miles from Williard's camp.

"I'll start out," the Rio Kid decided, "by payin' a visit to this here Stateline and scoutin' the tradin' posts there. One other thing before I go, Major. Is Miles Elkorn to be trusted?"

Williard nodded emphatically.

"Absolutely. Not only is Elkorn the wealthiest settler in Northern California, but he has timber holdings and mining claims which give him a motive for wanting to see the Modocs exterminated. Miles Elkorn has been of incalculable value to our campaign to date. That is why General Grant's orders read for you to get in touch with Elkorn upon your arrival here."

The Rio Kid came to attention, saluted, right-about-faced and headed for the flap of the tent.

"Yuh'll see me next," he promised, "after I've badgered the Lion of the Lavabeds in his den. Good day, Major Williard."

Williard passed a hand over his eyes as he saw the canvas tent fly fall back to cover the Rio Kid's exit. The old campaigner would have wagered his chances of promotion, in that moment, on the probability of never seeing the Rio Kid alive again. . . .

SUNDOWN hues were burning out in the west when Robert Pryor finished his journey northward from Miles Elkhorn's lumber camp and reined up his cavalry horse, Saber, on a bluff overlooking Lost River and the isolated settlement of Stateline.

He bore little resemblance to the sprucely uniformed cavalry officer who had arrived at Miles Elkorn's sawmill camp the night before. Upon their return from Williard's camp, Elkorn had outfitted him in a buckskin jacket, a miner's shirt of red flannel, corduroy pants, and shabby, run-down mountain boots.

Buckled over the buckskin blouse were his Colt .45 six-guns, the only accoutrement of his former attire which the Rio Kid had retained. To the casual eye, he resembled any one of a thousand mountaineers or prospectors in the region. Topping off the garb was a coontail cap.

Celestino Mireles, on the other hand, had retained his Old Mexican costume —braided gaucho jacket, flare-bottomed *charro* pants with silver tie-conchas bordering the red velvet triangle sewed along the outseams, fancy Chihuahuan spurs with star rowels, and the red sash, bright serape and ball-tasseled sombrero of his native land.

They were accompanied on their ride up from Elkorn's place by Frank Riddle and Winema and a young handlebar-mustached enlisted man from Major

Williard's 21st Infantry, Sergeant Walker Henry.

The sergeant was riding to Stateline to pick up a squad of recruits from the Rogue River country.

"There you have it, Captain," Sergeant Henry explained, gesturing with an arm toward the sprawl of false-fronted saloons, log-walled hurdygurdy houses, corrals and soddies which made up the river town. "Stateline, wildest hell-hole this side of the Mother Lode gold camps. You shouldn't have far to look for villains in that uncurried neck of purgatory, I guarantee you that."

Pryor tossed the bushy coontail back over his shoulder and stared moodily at the smoking chimneys of Stateline, watching the outlines of the main street grow dim as the light waned.

Traffic teemed on that crooked street which followed the bend of Lost River. Muleskinners drove pack trains across the shallow river ford, northbound for the Oregon settlements with peltries for the Portland market. Canvas-hooded freight wagons were parked in endless rows along the river front, lifeblood of the arteries of commerce which webbed out from Stateline to all points of the compass.

"We'll split up here and ride into town separately, folks," the Rio Kid said, hipping over in saddle to regard his trail mates. "It won't hurt for you, Sergeant, to be seen ridin' into Stateline with Riddle and Winema here, since it's known they are employed by the Army."

Sergeant Henry nodded and grinned.

"I understand, sir," he said, "your desire to pose as a mere trapper or hunter, with no Army connections. I shan't recognize you if I pass you on the street."

Pryor turned to his Mexican *compadre*.

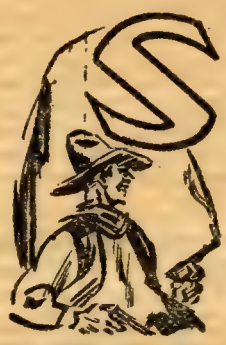
"For the time bein', Celestino, it'll be just as well if Stateline don't know you and I are together. Yuh may be asked questions. If so, pose as a *hidalgo* from some big *hacienda* down around Los Angeles."

Celestino Mireles' white teeth flashed in a smile.

"*Si*, General," the Mexican answered, using the nickname he habitually reserved for his partner of the out-trails. "I weel be waiting at the Cascades Leevery Barn wheech Senora Winema told us about."

CHAPTER IV

Gun Boss of Stateline



SERGEANT HENRY touched his horse's flanks with steel and vanished down the tree-lined trail. Winema reined her blue roan closer alongside Pryor's dun, and her low, modulated voice held a note of worry as she spoke to him.

"The loggers at Elkorn's mill know you are the famous Rio Kid," the Modoc girl reminded him. "They come to Stateline to drink their firewater and dance with the bad women. They cannot be trusted to keep your secret."

The Rio Kid smiled down at the Indian girl.

"That's so, Winema. But you and yore husband are the only folks I've told my plans to, knowin' yuh may be in a position to help me. The lumberjacks at Elkorn's place may not see anything out of the way in my change of clothes."

She nodded, and dropped back.

Celestino Mireles was the next to break away from the group, riding down through the gathering darkness to await his partner at the livery stable which Winema had recommended.

"You are trying to find out who might be selling supplies to the Modocs," Frank Riddle commented. "I am going to give you a bit of information for what it may be worth. In Stateline, the rougher element acknowledges no law except that of gun and knife. And the gun boss of Stateline is a trader who runs a wagon freight line between Yreka and Jacksonville."

The Rio Kid's brows arched quizzically.

"His name?" he inquired softly.

"Dorian Fiske," Riddle answered. "A bad man, a killer. You will probably find him this evening at his saloon, the Golden Poppy Bar. Or perhaps at his freight barns, which he calls the Bon Marche Warehouse. It is there he stores his trade goods."

The Rio Kid gathered up his reins and urged Saber down onto the trail.

"Thanks, Riddle," he called back.

"Remember, I'm a fur trapper from the redwoods country, if anybody should ask. And if yuh meet me on the street, yuh don't know me from Adam. *Adios, amigos.*"

In minutes Pryor was sending his mouse-colored dun splashing along the muddy street of Stateline, keeping well against the crowded boardwalks to avoid the heavy-wheeled wagons which jammed the street. He passed up a dozen-odd saloons and gambling halls before he caught sight of a towering barn, constructed of whipsawed lumber from Elkorn's mill, whose false front advertised it to be the Bon Marche Trade Goods Warehouse.

Dorian Fiske's barn was locked and deserted-looking. The Rio Kid continued on down the street, drawn to a rambling log-walled structure with whale-oil flares guttering at the eaves of its wooden-awninged porch. As he drew into the dancing firelight, he saw that the flares illuminated a gaudy sign. Gilt letters informed him that this was the:

GOLDEN POPPY SALOON
Dorian Fiske, Prop.

"Fiske's quite the hi-you-mucky-muck of Stateline, if he runs the town's biggest whisky den," the Rio Kid muttered. finding a spot for Saber at the crowded hitch-rack. "The kind of feller who might well be willin' to sell out his countrymen for the stolen gold Captain Jack's Modocs would pay him for contraband supplies."

Shouldering through the batwings of the Golden Poppy, the Rio Kid was amazed at the elegance of this frontier saloon. Imported crystal chandeliers illuminated the crowded barroom: ornate mirrors, polished to vivid brilliance, adorned the backbar; in place of rough-hewn puncheons, the floor was covered with hardwood in elaborate parquet designs.

A GAMBLING hall off to the left of the bar was crowded with miners, mule skinners, lumberjacks and freighters, staking their gold at the faro bank and roulette layout, the chuck-a-luck cage and the numerous poker tables. To

Before the Rio Kid could get a gun from leather, something exploded against his coonskin cap and his knees caved (CHAP. IV)

the right was a dancehall where roughly-dressed mountain men whirled silken-gowned percentage girls on a polished maple floor to music supplied by a tin-panny orchestra of banjos, fiddles and a rickety piano.

In an effort to make himself inconspicuous, the Rio Kid found himself a spot at the bar and ordered brandy. The bartender had hardly placed bottle and glass before him than Pryor felt a jovial hand slap him on the back.

"The Rio Kid, in person!" boomed a friendly voice. "I come from the Texas Panhandle myself, son. Heard plenty about yuh when I was punchin' long-horns after the war."

Pryor groaned as he turned to see a lumberjack who had shared his bunk-house at Elkorn's camp the night before. He could not recall the logger's name, but the Texan had spoken so loudly that the Rio Kid found himself the focal point of curious stares on all sides.

"From Texas, eh?" he said boredly, signaling the barkeep for another glass. "Have some *aguardiente* with me?"

While they were watching the amber glow of the liquor, the logger kept up a running flow of conversation, mainly about his bad luck in the Mother Lode gold camps and his eventual arrival at Miles Elkorn's sawmill in Northern California.

"Been here two winters, eh?" the Rio Kid remarked. "Yuh ought to know the owned of this place, then. Dorian Fiske. Could yuh point him out to me?"

The logger, already in his cups, swung his bleary gaze over the smoke-clouded room, then gestured vaguely toward the door leading to the dancehall.

"That'sh Dorian Fishke yander, Rio Kid!" the lumberjack announced. "Jush' stand here a shecond, Kid, an' I'll fotch him over here an' interdooce him to yuh. Fishke is the curly wolf of this burg. Fashtest gun draw in Californy, bar none."

Before Pryor could protest, the logger was lurching down the bar toward a tall, frock-coated man who was standing by the dancehall entrance, aloof from the crowd.

Dropping a gold octagonal on the mahogany to pay for his brandy, the Rio Kid headed unobtrusively for the batwings. He didn't like the way things were shaping up. His casual question to Elkorn's logger had backfired. He had no desire for Dorian Fiske to have him pointed as the Rio Kid, an Army officer now masquerading in buckskins.

Slipping out into the night, the Rio Kid walked up to a window and peered inside. His drunken logger friend had sprawled flat on the floor and two housemen were dragging him toward a back entrance. He would sober up in the muddy gutter outside.

Grinning with relief, the Rio Kid swung his gaze toward Dorian Fiske, grateful for a chance to size up the gun-boss of Stateline. Frank Riddle believed Fiske would bear watching as a potential renegade smuggler working in collusion with the beleaguered Lion of the Lavabeds, Captain Jack.

Fiske appeared to be in his late thirties, his high cheekbones and coarse black hair hinting of a strain of Indian blood in his own veins. He wore the white buckwing collar and string tie of of a gambler. Six-guns were buckled at his thighs, the holsters snugged down against his ribbed marseilles pants.

Even at a distance, Pryor could sense the utter ruthlessness of the man whose guns ruled this bawdy trail town.

Leaving the Golden Poppy, the Rio Kid walked down an alley flanking the saloon, heading for a dingy hotel on a back street which he had spotted on his way into town. If rooms were available there, he would book one and return to see about Saber's grooming and graining for the night.

On the morrow, he would make a thorough reconnaissance of Stateline, checking on all trading posts in the town and conferring with Frank Riddle and Winema on the backgrounds of the traders who ran them. If this failed to uncover any leads, he planned to find Celestino Mireles and make a scouting trip into the Lavabeds to carry out the first of Major Williard's secret orders.

HE WAS emerging on the back street when the blow came, from behind. His only warning of danger was a scuffle of boots in the mud behind the saloon, and the whistle of a gun barrel zipping in a short arc toward his head.

Before the Rio Kid could duck and get a gun from leather, something exploded against his coonskin cap and his knees caved under him, plunging him into a black vortex in which he knew no pain,

no sensations of any kind. It was complete oblivion. . . .

Icy water splashing his face brought the Rio Kid back from the spinning void that had engulfed him. As consciousness returned it brought a stifling sense of confinement which he soon interpreted as a blindfold knotted over his eyes and ropes trussing his arms to his sides and binding his legs at knees and ankles.

Then a bottle neck was reamed between his teeth and he found himself gagging on forty-rod whisky. He swallowed a gulp of the fiery liquor, felt it sting his vitals and clear the dull, throbbing agony under his skull.

Then, as if from a remote distance, he heard a hoarse masculine voice calling him by name.

"Pryor! Robert Pryor! Yuh feel up to answerin' a few questions, Captain?"

The Rio Kid shook his head dazedly. He still felt stupefied from the results of his pistol-whipping. All sense of time or space were lost to him. But his captor had addressed him by his military title of rank! His Captaincy was a secret.

"Yuh surprised that I know yuh're an Army spy, Rio Kid?" taunted the voice, above him. "Yore secret wasn't kept well, Captain. Yuh come to Stateline straight from Major Williard's quarters. Yuh're workin' under secret orders. What are yore orders, Pryor?"

The Rio Kid struggled to a sitting position. Rough hands gripped his trussed arms and slid him around, pushing him back against what appeared to be a wall of unbarked logs.

"What are yore secret orders, Captain Pryor?" the voice demanded urgently. "Who or what was yuh lookin' for in town tonight? Why did yuh go to the Golden Poppy?"

The Rio Kid clamped his mouth grimly. He had no idea who was speaking to him. The voice had familiar overtones, yet gave him no clue to its owner's identity. Where he was, or how long he had been unconscious, were riddles equally unanswerable.

"Take off this blindfold," he panted. "I want to see who I'm talkin' to."

A grating laugh answered him.

"Yuh're a spy, Captain Pryor. In time of war—even the Modoc War—spies know the price of failure. But yore life'll be spared if yuh tell me what you and Major Williard are plannin'."

The Rio Kid shook his head slowly from side to side, the torture of his muddled brain striking nausea in the pit of his stomach. His nostrils detected the faint odor of human sweat and tobacco above the whisky fumes.

"An Army spy," he retorted, "wouldn't be worth the powder to blow him to Hades if he told anybody his orders."

A weighty silence followed his defy. Pryor heard shell belts creak as his captor changed position.

"Pryor," he was asked, "did yuh ever hear of Boston Charley and Hooker Jim?"

The Rio Kid nodded, remembering Major Williard's reference to Captain Jack's sub-chieftains that morning when the commanding officer of the 21st Infantry was outlining the progress of the Modoc campaign.

"Boston Charley and Hooker Jim are waitin' within earshot of this spot, Pryor," his captor said grimly. "They're Indians, of the most bloodthirsty breed. They'll have ways of makin' yuh tell yore secret which I, a civilized white man, wouldn't think of doin'. Want I should bring my Modoc friends here?"

Despair made the hairs on the Rio Kid's neck-nape lift but he braced himself grimly, knowing that it would do no good to lie about Major Williard's confidential orders. Even if he satisfied his captor that he was speaking the truth, it would mean a bullet in the head.

"Bring on yore redskins," he grated, pulling in a hard breath. "I won't tell nothin' to a man who's such a coward he's afraid to let his face be seen."

He heard his captor rise from a squat and cross a short length of hard earthen floor. Cold night wind fanned the Rio Kid's face, followed by the sound of a door closing on bullhide hinges. Then the sound of retreating footsteps died away outdoors.

The Rio Kid, Celestino Mireles and their fighting pards are at their battling best when they take the SANTA FE TRAIL in the smash-packed complete novel of that name by Tom Curry—coming in our next issue!

CHAPTER V

Modoc Chieftains

JERKING his head backward and forward, Bob Pryor rubbed the knot of his blindfold against the rough bark wall at his back. Luck rewarded him with a protruding sliver which caught the fabric of the blindfold, enabling him to work it down over his nose.

He opened his eyes to find himself squinting into the glare of a stub of tallow candle jutting from the neck of a beer bottle which rested on an empty box a few feet in front of him.

Staring about, the Rio Kid saw that he had been brought to a small, pole-rafter cabin roughly ten feet square, and completely unfurnished. A square of scraped wolfskin formed a semi-transparent window in the log wall opposite the slab door.

His feet were bound with hempen rope, knotted so securely that the Rio Kid gave up any attempt to wriggle free.

But another idea came to his fertile brain. Hitching himself across the earthen floor, he raised his hobnail-booted feet over the guttering candle flame, letting the fire kindle the strands of the rope trussing his legs.

The dry hemp charred. Heat blistered his calves. The rancid odor of his burning logboots wafted to his nostrils. It was a desperate race against time, for Pryor did not doubt that his captor would soon return with two Indians, bent on torturing him until he had betrayed Major Williard's secret plans for his conquest of the Lavabeds.

After an eternity of balancing his legs over the tiny flame, the Rio Kid felt the ropes part and he was able to kick his feet free. Then, rolling over on his side, he leaned against the sputtering candle and set to work burning his arm bonds in two.

Ten minutes dragged like an eon before the dry cordage parted and he was tugging his arms free, pulling off the ropes which coiled about him.

The last rope fell to the floor just as the Rio Kid's ears caught a mutter of voices outside. He saw the hickory bar of the slab door jerk taut as a hand pulled the latch string outside.

Sweat burst from the Texan's pores as he realized that the Indians had trapped him. The skin-covered window was barely a foot square, too small for escape. His hands flashed to his holsters, found them empty. His bowie knife had been removed from its sheath.

A wild glance around the cabin told him that no weapon was available. And the slab door was beginning to swing open!

In the clock-tick of time remaining to him, the Rio Kid stooped to pinch out the stub of candle and seize the quart beer bottle by the neck, snatching at the only weapon at his command. The door swung open, revealing the silhouetted figures of two squatty Indians whose jutting eagle feathers identified them as Modoc chieftains.

The cabin was in pitch blackness. The two Modocs paused a moment on the threshold, letting their eyes become accustomed to the dark. They muttered between themselves in their native jargon, apparently suspecting nothing wrong in the sudden extinguishing of the candle. The blast of wind from the opening door could have accounted for that.

One of the Modocs groped into the cabin, fumbling in his linsey-woolsey shirt for matches. His companion waited in the doorway, silhouetted against the winking lights of Stateline down the mountain slope.

Pryor pounced then with all the ferocity of a cougar, and swung the beer bottle in a sweeping arc toward the nearest Modoc's head. The glass clubbed against the Indian's pate and exploded in a spray of shards. The Modoc slumped sideward, dazed by the terrific blow.

VAULTING his adversary's sprawling body, Pryor launched himself at the Indian on the threshold, wielding the jagged stub of bottle like a knife. The notched fangs of the broken bottle raked down the Indian's cheek as the Modoc fell back, bawling with pain. Blood showered Pryor as he followed the slashing stroke with a left uppercut that landed home on a jutting chin with all the power in the man's husky arm.

Knocked spinning, the Indian

GENERAL E. R. S. CANBY AND THE MODOC WAR

THE Modocs were a small but extremely warlike tribe of coastal Indians whose hunting grounds were located between the California boundary and Crater Lake, Oregon. Since earliest times they were known to be hostile. The U. S. Army in 1863 founded Fort Klamath to protect Oregon settlers against the Modocs. In the following year, the Klamath and Modoc tribes were placed on a reservation.

Shortly afterward the Modocs, under their cruel chieftain, Captain Jack, jumped the reservation. Captain Jack began a reign of terror, scalping and burning.

General E. R. S. Canby, commanding the Columbia Department of the U. S. Army, sent four companies of cavalry and three companies of infantry to Fort Klamath to quell the Indian uprising, resulting in three bands of Modocs consolidating and retreating to the famous Lavabeds of Northern California in November, 1872.

In January, 1873, the "Modoc War" got under way with an assault on the Lavabeds. Captain Jack, "Lion of the Lavabeds," took command of the Indians. The U. S. Army was unable to rout the Modocs.

In April, a Peace Commission composed of General E. R. S. Canby and prominent Indian agents met with Captain Jack for a peace parley. Captain Jack and his chiefs appeared to be friendly, but at a signal from the Modoc, they attacked the Commission, killing General Canby and the chief Indian agent. Other members of the party were rescued by Winema, squaw cousin of Captain Jack, and wife of an interpreter named Frank Riddle.

The traitorous Modocs withdrew to the Lavabeds where they were strengthened with smuggled supplies from white renegades. During May and June, 1873, the Army, reinforced by Oregon Mounted Militia and California Volunteer Rifles, succeeded in trapping the Modocs, and Captain Jack and his fellow chiefs were finally captured alive, officially ending the Modoc War.

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sprawled outside and measured his length on the ribbon of path leading to the cabin. Pryor leaped to follow up his momentary advantage, then tripped over the first Indian's legs and sprawled through the doorway.

He had a dim glimpse of the other chieftain scrambling to his feet, groaning with pain. Then, without waiting to give battle, the Indian whirled and bolted into the underbrush, crashing through the trees in desperate, head-

long flight.

Panting heavily, the Rio Kid came to his feet, stepping back into the cabin and straining his ears. The groaning of the Modoc at his feet and the far-off sounds of revelry and street traffic down in Stateline were the only noises he could identify.

The white man who had questioned him, then, had not returned with "Hooker Jim" and "Boston Charley." But he might show up at any moment, and he would be armed.

Closing the door of the cabin, the Rio Kid struck a match, found the candle and lighted it.

The Modoc—whether he was Hooker Jim or Boston Charley, the Kid could not tell—was showing signs of returning consciousness. The Rio Kid's first move was to take possession of a pair of matched Colt .45s which the Indian had jabbed in his belt.

The heft of the weapons informed Pryor, even before he examined them closely, that they were his own guns! In all probability, then, this Indian and his companion had been the ones who had attacked him in the rear of the Golden Poppy Saloon and brought him up the slope to this prospector's deserted shack.

Using the rope which had bound him, the Rio Kid hogtied the groaning Indian hand and foot. He debated whether to question the Modoc, on the off chance that the Indian spoke English, concerning the identity of the white man who, in some fashion, knew of the Rio Kid's assignment from Major Williard.

Then, realizing the danger of letting himself be trapped a second time, he slipped out into the night. He concealed himself in the brush a dozen yards from the shack, where he could spot his mysterious inquisitor coming up the trail.

Twenty minutes passed without any sign of the other Indian's return. The Rio Kid finally plotted out a course of action. He would escort his Indian captive back to Stateline and turn him over to Sergeant Walker Henry for transfer back to Major Williard's headquarters. The Army would regard any sub-chieftain of Captain Jack's as a fine prize of war.

In the act of emerging from the undergrowth and returning to the cabin, Bob Pryor's attention was arrested by a thud of hoofs moving up the slope to his rear. At first thought, he believed that his questioner was returning to the cabin with a group of confederates, all mounted. If so, it would be out of the question to challenge such overwhelming odds.

Crouching low in the tangled thicket, the Rio Kid wriggled his way through the brush in the direction of the approaching cavalcade. Then he was peering out over a broad trail which he recognized as the one he had traveled to reach Stateline a few hours before.

Almost abreast of his hiding place was a single mounted man, dressed in mackinaw and floppy-brimmed hat, riding a mule of such diminutive stature that the rider's legs nearly scraped the ground. Following the mule rider was a string of pack horses, each loaded with a pair of heavy wooden crates diamond-hitched to the packsaddles.

Obviously, this was a pack train outbound from Stateline with trade goods. And they were heading in the direction of the Modoc-held Lavabeds!

STARLIGHT gleaming on the white-painted boxes revealed large fleur-de-lis designs stenciled on their sides, together with large printed letters: "Consigned to Bon Marché Warehouse, Stateline." This mule train, then, belonged to Dorian Fiske!

The rider halted his mule directly opposite the spot where the Rio Kid crouched in the ailanthus thicket above the trail, and struck a match to light his corncob pipe. The flare of light behind the mule-skinner's cupped palms revealed a craggy, whiskery-faced man whom the Rio Kid remembered having seen at the bar of the Golden Poppy.

His pipe spouting tiny bomb-bursts of smoke, the man jerked on his lead rope and headed on up the trail, moving out of range of the Rio Kid's vision.

Questions hammered at Pryor's aching skull. Was it customary for Dorian Fiske to send his pack trains out into Indian-infested timberland in the dead of night? Did Fiske have some reason for the secrecy which seemed to enshroud the departure of this mule string from Stateline?

"Ten to one it's a shipment headed for Captain Jack's holin'-in place," Pryor muttered. "If it is, then Riddle's hunch about Fiske workin' in league with the Modocs was correct."

Trailing the pack mules would be simple, even on foot. But he had the Indian chieftain in the cabin to think about. It would not do to let his captive be rescued by his Indian companion or by anyone else hostile to the Army.

Pryor headed back through the brush toward the cabin, fuming with impatience. If only Celestino were on hand to take over the Indian's custody, leaving him free to trail the suspicious-looking pack train toward the Lavabeds!

Bob Pryor pushed open the door of the cabin where he had been held prisoner. The candle was still burning on the dirt floor of the shack. But the Indian he had left here less than half an hour ago was gone.

A pile of cut ropes lay on the cabin floor. And it was impossible that the Modoc could have freed himself!

Then a glance at the knife-ripped window on the opposite wall told the Rio Kid what had happened. The Indian's fellow-chief had wriggled through the narrow opening to rescue his partner, perhaps during the time Pryor had been keeping the cabin under close watch from the Stateline trail.

CHAPTER VI

Trail to Tragedy

ANY attempt to track down the fugitive Modocs would be a fruitless waste of time in this brushy terrain and in the darkness, the Rio Kid concluded. Waiting for the white man to show up at the cabin might also be futile. The fact that he had not returned with Boston Charley and Hooker Jim was proof that he expected the Indians to report to him at some other rendezvous, following their torture and slaying of their prisoner.

Cursing at the opportunity which had slipped through his fingers, Pryor headed back down the slope toward Stateline. Reaching the edge of the town, he consulted his watch in the glare of a miner's lighted window.

It was a little after midnight. More time had elapsed when he was unconscious than he had estimated, for it had been shortly after ten o'clock when he had left the Golden Poppy.

Avoiding the main street, Pryor searched out the Cascades Livery Barn down by the river, where Winema had suggested that Celestino wait. He found his young Mexican friend playing monte with the hostlers. Celestino excused himself and joined the Rio Kid outside the livery barn.

The ugly blue welt on Pryor's temple required explanations. Tersely the Rio Kid outlined the events that had transpired since his arrival in Stateline four hours before.

"Saber is hitched in front of the Golden Poppy, Celestino," the Rio Kid wound up. "It wouldn't do for me to pick him up. I'll take yore mustang and meet yuh at the head of the trail leadin' into town. *Andale*, amigo. We can't run the risk of losin' track of Fiske's mule string."

Mireles grinned, eager for action following his long period of waiting at the livery stable for his partner's arrival.

"My black is saddled and waiting, General," he whispered. "I weel breeng heem pronto."

In a short time the Rio Kid was heading out of Stateline astride Celestino's powerful midnight black stallion. By the time he reached the head of the Lavabeds trail, his Mexican partner was aproaching on Saber, Pryor's leggy dun.

They switched mounts and headed on up the trail into the sugar pines, riding abreast as they passed the spot where the Rio Kid had spied on Fiske's mule driver.

A tardy moon gave them ample light to follow the winding trail when they were an hour out of Stateline. So far they had not overhauled Fiske's pack train, but the tracks of the mules were plain on the well-traveled trail, proof that the muleteer had not cut off onto some obscure game trail en route.

They reached a fork in the trail an hour later and dismounted to read sign. The Rio Kid's pulses raced as he saw that Dorian Fiske's mule train had left the main route which led to Yreka and the scene of Jed Blake's massacre. Instead, the heavily-loaded mules had turned southeast, following a deer trail which headed in the general direction

of Tule Lake and the Lavabeds.

"I think we're follerin' a good hunch here, Celestino," Pryor commented, as they remounted. "Freight traffic usually keeps to the main road headed south. There ain't any settlement east of here, accordin' to Williard. Which means that Fiske's merchandise is headed either to the Army post or to Injun country over in the Lavabeds."

They pushed off down the deer trail, loosening their six-guns in holsters. Fiske's mules could not be far ahead, plodding at their slow gait. When once they had spotted the mule string, they planned to trail at a safe distance. Daylight should find them at the edge of the Lavabeds, where they could get positive proof that Dorian Fiske was dealing with the Modocs.

Then, without warning, there came to the ears of the two man hunters a sharp fusillade of gunfire, somewhere beyond the ridge they were climbing. The shooting trailed off, followed by blood-curdling Indian war whoops, then a brooding silence broken only by the sough of the night wind through the lofty sugar pines.

THE Rio Kid and Celestino reined up staring at each other.

"Sounds like the Modocs jumped Fiske's mule drover!" Pryor exclaimed, hauling his carbine from its boot under the saddle fender. "If that's the case, we were mistaken about where that freight shipment was headed, Celestino."

They galloped to the top of the rise and dipped into the ravine beyond. The trail led down into a rocky canyon where a tributary of Lost River drained into Tule Lake, the latter body of water visible in the distance, its mirror-smooth surface dancing with moonbeams.

Beyond Tule Lake loomed the forbidding reaches of the Lavabeds, domain of the warring Modocs.

"No use riskin' our own scalps, Celestino!" Pryor whispered, stepping out of saddle. "We'll hide our mounts and go on afoot. That shootin' didn't come from far up that canyon."

Leaving Saber and the Mexican's stallion ground-hitched in a brushy defile well off the trail, the two partners headed on down the trail, rifles ready for emergencies.

Before they reached the burbling torrent at the pit of the canyon, they heard a rumble of hoofs heading in the direction of the Lavabeds, accompanied by triumphant Indian shouts. Then a bend in the canyon cut off the megaphoning noises.

Sprinting down the trail, the Rio Kid suddenly flung out an arm to halt his Mexican *companero*. Celestino spotted the sprawled figure in buckskins lying across the moonlit trail at the same instant.

It was the mule drover from the Bon Marché, the corncob pipe still clamped in his teeth. Feather-tipped arrows jutted from the skinner's mackinaw and he had been riddled with ambush lead. There was no trace of the mule train or its cargo.

White-faced and tense, Bob Pryor and Celestino approached the prostrate figure. It seemed impossible that Fiske's drover could be alive, but as they drew closer they saw a jet of tobacco smoke fork from the man's nostrils.

Riddled with bullets, bristling with arrows, the muleskinner was smoking his way into eternity!

The man's eyes fluttered open as the Rio Kid knelt beside him, Celestino Mireles posting himself to one side with eyes raking the moon-drenched canyon beyond.

"Modocs jumped yuh, old-timer?" Pryor asked gently.

The corncob pipe waggled in the dying man's teeth as he struggled to speak.

"Yeah. Some skunk tipped off the red devils—I was slippin' out of—Stateline after dark. Dozen-odd—redskins—lyin' in wait choused my cargo."

The Rio Kid leaned closer to catch the drover's whispered words. A death-rattle was in the man's throat and any moment might be his last on earth.

"Is Dorian Fiske workin' with the Modocs?" Pryor demanded tensely. "Try and talk, *amigo*. We're friends."

The mule driver's body shook with a paroxysm of agony. Crimson bubbles swelled and broke on the corners of his mouth as the pipe dropped from his lips.

"My cargo—blankets an' pup tents—for Williard's Army," the drover got out. "Cap'n Jack—uh—ahhh—"

The man's whisper trailed off and his eyes rolled gruesomely in their sockets as his mortal spirit took wing.

The Rio Kid came to his feet, tugging

off his coonskin cap and staring down at the dead man.

"I don't know what to make of this, Celestino," he said bleakly. "He didn't say yes or no about Fiske dealin' with the Modocs. On the face of it, I'd say that tonight's attack shows Dorian Fiske ain't guilty. After all, we only had Frank Riddle's hunch to go on."

Celestino reached out to seize his partner's sleeve, pointing with his rifle barrel in the direction from which they had come.

"*Caballos*—horses come, General!" the Mexican whispered. "Indians, perhaps. We hide, *no es verdad?*"

VAULTING the muleskinner's corpse, the Rio Kid and Celestino leaped off the trail and scrambled down into the glacial boulders which rimmed the mountain stream.

They had barely taken concealment when a cavalcade of mounted Indians galloped down the trail from the direction of Stateline, their ponies' hoofs trampling the dead freighter as they swept on down the canyon.

There were ten riders in all, and from his hiding place in the boulders the Rio Kid recognized at least two of the Modocs. One, his face wrapped in swathing bandages, was the Indian he had slashed with the broken beer bottle. The leader of the cavalcade was the Indian who had been rescued from the cabin before midnight. Boston Charley and Hooker Jim.

But the moonlight also had revealed the identity of two riders who were roped to their saddles. Even after the Indians had thundered past and vanished around the curving gorge, the Rio Kid wondered if his imagination had been playing him tricks. It had seemed to him, in the fleeting glimpse he had had of the Modoc's prisoners, that they were—

"Frank Riddle an' hees *esposa*, Senora Winema!" gasped Celestino, confirming Bob Pryor's identification. "Thos' *Indios* captured our *amigos* over een Stateline, no?"

Horror coursed through the Rio Kid's veins as he realized what had transpired. Two days ago, Captain Jack had launched a surprise attack on Blake's Farm with the idea of wreaking his vengeance against his blood cousin, Winema, and her white husband, Frank Riddle.

The Lion of the Lavabeds had been thwarted in his designs at Blake's by the timely intervention of the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles. But Captain Jack had not delayed long in striking again at the young squaw who was serving as an interpreter for the U.S. Army.

"This accounts for Boston Charley's and Hooker Jim's presence near Stateline last night, Celestino!" the Rio Kid exclaimed. "They must have known where the Riddles were stayin' and kidnaped 'em! Major Williard says that Captain Jack placed a bounty on the topknots of Winema and her husband."

Of one accord, the two adventurers climbed out of the rocks and headed up the trail where they had left Saber and the black stallion. They did not speak again until they were in saddle, heading down the canyon trail in pursuit of the Indian band.

Their horses shied in passing the hoof-mangled corpse of Dorian Fiske's muleskinner, but there was no time to waste in burying the unfortunate man. Much as it went against the Rio Kid's grain to leave a fellow white man as

[*Turn page*]

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(Adv.)

prey for coyotes and buzzards, the plight of Winema and Frank Riddle demanded their utmost efforts.

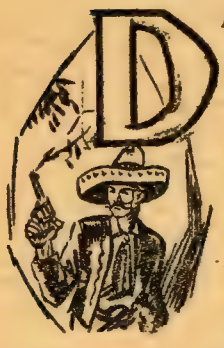
"Half of our job is to scout the Lavabeds and give the Army an idea of the strength of Captain Jack's forces," Pryor called to the Mexican who galloped at his stirrup. "We know them redskins are headed for the Lavabeds. This is our chance to find the trail to Captain Jack's hidin' place!"

That they were heading, two white men, into a tangled *malpais* of treeless rocks and bottomless canyons where hostile Modocs had kept a formidable U.S. Army at bay for months, did not deter Pryor and Celestino now.

The Modocs were notorious for their torture of helpless prisoners, and both men knew that Captain Jack would reserve his most excruciating punishment for Winema and her husband. In the Modoc's eyes, the young squaw was guilty of treason to her race, and the fact that she was being taken alive into the Lavabeds was proof that Captain Jack demanded personal retribution against his cousin!

CHAPTER VII

Into the Lavabeds



DAWN was staining the lofty volcanic formations of the Lavabeds when the trailing avengers caught sight of the Indian band led by Hooker Jim and Boston Charley. The cavalcade was traveling at a slower gait now, threading along the rimrock which overhung the cold waters of Tule Lake.

"We can never hope to foller 'em into the Lavabeds on hossback, Celestino," the Rio Kid said dubiously. "We'd be picked off from ambush within a mile. I'm afraid we've got to turn our *caballos* loose to graze until we can come back for 'em, *compadre*."

They reined off into the sparse timber which lined the north shore of Tule Lake and stripped saddles from Saber and the black, caching their gear and bridles in a leafy maple, well off the ground where rodents would not damage the leather.

Both men choked with emotion as they turned their prime saddlers loose to graze. Neither confessed to the other the feeling that was uppermost in their minds—that they might not live to reclaim the two saddlers. In such an eventuality, at least the horses were free to forage for themselves.

Leaving their rifles behind and carrying only a saddlebag loaded with provisions and a canteen of water, they pushed on down the trail which entered the northern reaches of the Lavabeds.

Within the space of a hundred yards, it seemed that they had invaded the sterile Mountains of the Moon. All trace of trees and grass and wild mountain flowers were left behind at the edge of the vast scoria fields.

Following the captors of Winema and Frank Riddle was not difficult, for the lava held traces of passing hoofs. That indicated that the canyon they were following, while it held no clearly defined trail, was a commonly used route of travel for Indians coming from and going to the wild *pedregal* they had chosen for their last stand.

The sun had climbed to its noon position in the cloudless sky before the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles came in sight of the Indians they were following. It was rough going for horses, and all of the Modoc party, with the exception of their two prisoners, were working their way into the Lavabeds on foot, leading their ponies.

The pursuers were traversing a dead, bitter land that defied description. One moment they were recoiling from yawning fissures in the volcanic rock which seemed to be bottomless cracks penetrating awesomely to the core of the earth; the next they were detouring around the bases of lofty cinder cones or towering chimney rocks which spiked the *pedregal* like mammoth stalactites.

Innumerable caves and eroded grottos stippled the layers of hardened lava. They chose one to rest in when hunger and fatigue overcame them, there wolfing down a hurried meal.

Then they were again resuming their trek, shivering one minute in blue-clotted shadow where the sun's rays never penetrated, and boiling the next where beetling igneous cliffs radiated the sunshine like the sides of a furnace.

It was two o'clock by Pryor's watch

when, unexpectedly, they crawled out on a lofty ledge to find they had reached the end of the trail.

A sparkling artesian well gushed from a scarp-rimmed basin below them, fed by gravity from melting snowfields higher in the Siskiyous—the "Fountain of the Gods" which Winema had reported as being the Modoc's water supply.

Beyond the geysering well was the entrance of a mighty cavern which dwarfed the others Pryor and Mireles had seen. Modoc warriors thronged in and out of the cavern like ants.

They saw no trace of Hooker Jim and Boston Charley, but the horses they had been trailing into the Lavabeds were drinking at the rim of a pool beside the artesian well. From somewhere back in the dark confines of the cave came the pulsing throb of Modoc war drums, tom-tomming in celebration of the capture of Winema and her white husband.

"This," the Rio Kid whispered, "is the Modoc headquarters."

OF WINEMA and Riddle they saw nothing. The prisoners had already been couducted inside the cavern which, the Rio Kid judged, was the headquarters camp of Captain Jack's band.

Remembering that Major Williard wanted a tally of Modoc strength, the two spies counted the assembled Indian braves as best they could and estimated them to number over three hundred—roughly half of the fighting population of the tribe, according to the Army's information.

"The others are scattered around the borders of the Lavabeds, on defense patrol," the Rio Kid muttered. "There are no squaws here, and that means that this is a military headquarters for the Modocs, Celestino. The old men and the women and kids must be camped somewhere else—further back in the Lavabeds probably, out of range of artillery fire."

The young Mexican scanned the Indian throngs at the entrance of the cavern and shuddered involuntarily.

"Senora Winema and her *esposo*, they are the gone gooses, no?" he whispered. "We can do nossings to safe them ageenst such odds, General."

The Rio Kid nodded, sick with despair as he contemplated the fate which awaited the two interpreters. Perhaps at this moment, Captain Jack and his cohorts were indulging in savage rituals inside the cavern, meting out to Winema and Frank Riddle inhuman penalties for their "treason."

While the two men watched, they saw husky young braves move out of the cavern with the string of mules belonging to Dorian Fiske. Older bucks gathered around and the pack animals were butchered with dispatch, to provide meat for the beleaguered tribe.

Suddenly the skies were heavy with remote thunder, though not a cloud was visible. Celestino stiffened, touching the Rio Kid's arm and pointing off to the southwest.

Black puffs of smoke appeared in the sky, and the steady rumble of thunder increased in volume. The rocks where they lay seemed to vibrate to a remote concussion, as if an earthquake was convulsing the Lavabeds.

"Cannonadin'!" Pryor whispered. "Williard has moved his howitzers up to try to shell the Modocs out into the open."

Glancing around at the ugly vista of the Lavabeds, the Rio Kid smiled bleakly. Storming the Modoc stronghold with cannon was like assaulting an elephant with pea-shooters. The artillery did not exist which could make a dent on these upflung badlands.

"*Caramba*!" whispered Mireles. "Thos' anthill has been tromped on by these cannon fire, General. Look!"

The Rio Kid swung his gaze back to the cave. The vast underground citadel was disgorging scores of warriors, carrying stolen Army rifles, and loaded down with belts of ammunition.

In their lead strode a powerful figure in buckskins, with a red-tipped eagle feather jutting from his bobbed hair.

"Captain Jack!" Pryor exclaimed. "The soldiers have tromped on the Lion's tail, Celestino. He's afraid that the bombardment will mebbe mean a full-scale infantry assault."

It was true. The Lion of the Lavabeds, shouting orders in the jargon of his tribe, was leading his warriors out into the tangled volcanic wilderness, heading in the direction of the howitzer attack. If Major Williard backed his cannoneers with infantry, they would meet a withering defensive fire.

Within ten minutes, the scene was deserted except for one white-haired old warrior who was busy cutting steaks from the skinned carcasses of the mules, down by the artesian fountain.

"It's almost as if Major Williard timed that artillery attack to draw Captain Jack's forces away from here, Celestino!" whispered the Rio Kid exultantly. "Now's our chance, if ever, to rescue Winema and Riddle! And do a little explorin' while we're at it."

Fierce lights glinted in Celestino's black eyes. He was like a war horse responding to the bugle ordering a charge.

"There weel be guards een the *cueva*," he warned. "And *quizas*— perhaps the preesoners are already dead. Let's go, General!"

Cautiously, the two avengers began their silent trek down the lava slope toward the Fountain of the Gods. Miles to southward batteries of American guns were pounding the Lavabeds with shot and shell, unaware of the providential cover they were giving the two spies in the heart of the Modoc domain. . . .

A CIRCLE of guttering pine-knot torches set in the cavern floor illuminated the vast, high-domed council chamber inside the Modoc cave. Frank Riddle, tied to a snubbing post imbedded in the lava paving, felt dwarfed by the vastness of the gallery.

His wife, Winema, had told him of the "Great Cave" in the Lavabeds, having visited this awesome place in her girlhood when her father, the tribal medicine man, had visited the forbidden region to commune with the Modoc deities.

Winema had pictured the Great Cave as large enough to hide Mount Shasta. That was a girlish exaggeration, but Riddle knew that the subterranean room he was now in was double the size of the Mammoth Cave, back in his native Kentucky.

Unlike the latter, however, this cavity under the Lavabeds had no stalagmites depending from the ceiling, there being no limestone or dripping water in this barren terrain. This vast underground hall was a good two hundred yards from daylight, and but one of a number of labyrinthian passages.

The firelight did not penetrate to the rest of the cave, but Riddle knew that the Indians stabled their horses further back inside the mountain.

This was the council chamber, the spot set aside for the torture rituals accompanying the war dances where prisoners were burned at the stake. More than one Army picket had been kidnaped and brought here to die in agony, Riddle knew.

More than one of Major Williard's outriders and scouts had vanished without trace during the past winter, and Riddle did not doubt but that they had wound up even as he was, tied to a torture stake in Captain Jack's Great Cave.

Just inside the extreme reaches of the firelight, the bearded interpreter could see stacks of supplies which had been smuggled to the Modocs from the outside. Barrels of gunpowder, crates of Army blankets and other quartermaster goods plundered from military wagon trains in Oregon; vast quantities of foodstuffs, obtained from sources unknown to the high command.

Seeing the secret of Captain Jack's strength, Riddle doubted if the Modoc War would ever be won by the Whites. It would end in a stalemate, with Captain Jack and his son's sons reigning supreme as kings of the Lavabeds.

At the far side of the cavern, Winema was roped to another torture stake. A pair of armed Modoc sentries, young braves with half-healed battle wounds, had been left behind to maintain a guard over the prisoners.

When today's battle was over and Captain Jack's weary legions trooped back to the Great Cave, there would be a debauch in which Winema and Riddle would play the chief roles—human torches.

Riddle had been without hope, ever since the evening before when he and his Indian wife had been captured by Modocs who had surrounded their little cabin in Stateline and kidnaped them without attracting the attention of neighbors. It had been a daring coup of Captain Jack's, sending Modoc warriors into the paleface settlement and seizing them without detection.

For himself, Riddle had no fear of torture and death. It was the price he must pay for the love he had known for the beautiful Indian girl who had become his wife. But he would have pawned his chances of heaven to be able to put a merciful bullet through Winema's brain and spare her the hideous

CAPTAIN JACK

IN THE winter of 1831 a papoose was born to the wife of a Modoc chieftain camped near the Table Rocks in Agate Desert, Oregon. The papoose was named "Kintupash," or "Mountain Lion."

By the time Kintupash was able to string an arrow to a bow, white men had begun to penetrate into Oregon. As a youth, Kintupash accompanied the older braves on sneak attacks aimed at covered wagon trains bound for California, then in the grip of the fabulous gold rush. When he was eighteen, Kintupash had begun his collection of paleface scalps, and in 1850, he succeeded his father as chief of the Modocs.

Kintupash inherited cruel tendencies which shocked even the traditionally brutal Modocs. He enjoyed subjecting white captives to mutilation and torture.

By 1860, when white settlements were taking permanent root in Oregon, Kintupash had become widely known by his Yankee nickname of "Captain Jack." He was the ringleader of forays against the whites and it was to curb Captain Jack that Fort Klamath was founded.

In 1865 Captain Jack was one of the signatories to the treaty which ceded the Klamath Lake Basin to the whites. He organized a revolt from the reservation in company with chiefs known to history as Schonchin, Boston Charley, Black Jim and Hooker Jim.

It was Captain Jack who in 1872 started the Modoc War, and it was also Captain Jack who agreed to meet the Peace Commission of 1873, where, by means of a six-gun smuggled to him by white renegades, he killed the noted General E. R. S. Canby.

The "Lion of the Lavabeds," as he was contemporarily known, was hanged with his petty chieftains in October, 1873, thus ending the career of one of history's cruelest Indian leaders.

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death which her cousin, the Modocs' Lion of the Lavabeds, was holding in store for her.

He called his wife's name, but she did not stir. She hung limply in the ropes which bound her to the torture stake across the cavern floor, head slumped on her chest, slumbering from the rigors of the grueling trail ride of the night past.

As the echoes of his voice reverberated through the great lava-arched gallery, Riddle heard a commotion at the entrance of the gallery. Twisting his head around, the interpreter stared in the direction of the two guards who patrolled the grotto.

Riddle's jaw sagged open as he saw that one of the guards was sprawled on

his back, the haft of a bowie knife jutting from his naked chest. And the other guard was wrestling in the grip of a buckskin-clad white man!

"Rio Kid!"

Riddle gasped the name even as he saw Captain Bob Pryor wrest a carbine from the struggling Indian and smash the butt hard to the Modoc's temple. His skull crushed by the clubbing rifle stock, the second guard slumped and lay motionless at Pryor's feet.

CHAPTER VIII

Den of the Lion

RIDDLE struggled to speak, but his throat seemed paralyzed. He saw Celestino emerge from behind a fluted column of lava from which the Mexican had flung his knife at the unsuspecting Indian sentry, to join the Rio Kid at the edge of the glow of pine torches which shed their ruddy witch-glow over the vast cavern.

"Pryor! Pryor!" the interpreter shouted, finding speech at last. "It's all right! If you've taken care of the outer guards you have no more Indians to worry about!"

Winema lifted her head and stared in disbelief as, roused from her stupor by her husband's shout, she watched Celestino Mireles and the Rio Kid race over to the stake where Riddle was awaiting torture.

A knife blade flickered in the gloom and then her husband was seizing the bowie from the Rio Kid's hand and racing across the cavern toward her. For the first time in their married years together, Winema gave way to feminine sobs as Riddle slashed her bonds and gathered her in his arms.

The Indian girl was drying her eyes when Bob Pryor and his Mexican partner, their faces wreathed with grins in the firelight, approached them across the cavern floor.

"You saved us from unspeakable doom, Captain," choked Frank Riddle, his own eyes swimming. "Winema and I are forever in your debt!"

The Rio Kid accepted his knife from the interpreter and slid it into its sheath. His face sobered, now that the exultation of their successful entry into the Great Cave was completed.

"We've got to get out of here, fast," he said. "The American cannonadin' is finished. Captain Jack and his band will came back here. And we'll have every Modoc in the Lavabeds combin' the place for us."

Winema reached out to clutch the Rio Kid's buckskin sleeve.

"I know these Lavabeds," she panted hoarsely. "I can lead you quickly to safety. I show you with a diagram—Watch!"

Pryor scowled curiously as he saw the Indian girl go down on one knee to trace a design in the dust with a finger tip.

"This is Tule Lake," the girl said, drawing a crude oblong. "Here"—scratching a wavy line away from the lake—"is the gorge which carries the water from the Fountain of the Gods into Tule Lake. The Modocs call it Flintridge Canyon. It opens on Tule Lake through a tiny break in the cliffs which my tribe calls *lawisis*, or the Devil's Eve. It is not visible from Elkhorn's place on the far shore."

The girl laid a lava pebble at the end of the crooked line.

"This rock," she explained, "is the Great Cave, my cousin Kintupash's headquarters. From the mouth of this cavern we can see where the Fountain drains into the head of Flintridge Canyon. Within an hour's time we can be at the edge of Tule Lake. within swimming distance of Miles Elkorn's sawmill on the west shore!"

The Rio Kid helped Winema to her feet.

"*Bueno*," he said crisply. "Celestino, you and the Riddles get started for the canyon. I'll foller. But while I'm here, I've got to check on the trade goods Captain Jack has stored here. If I'm not mistaken, they'll prove to be the main supply dump that Major Williard wanted me to locate."

Mireles bent a nervous stare at his partner.

"You weel not tarry long, General?" he asked anxiously. "Your life weel not be worth a *peseta* eef *Capitán* Jack and hees *Indios* catch you here."

Pryor waved impatiently toward the exit of the vast chamber, guarded now

by the corpses of the guards they had stalked in the outer grotto.

"Get a move on!" he ordered harshly. "Them barrels are full of gunpowder, if I ain't mistaken. I don't want to miss a chance to wipe out Captain Jack's arsenal at one fell swoop."

CELESTINO scowled indecisively, then followed Winema and Frank Riddle toward the exit of the Great Cave. The Rio Kid strode rapidly toward the supply cache, pausing when he reached the stack of gunpowder barrels.

Some of the crates bore the insignia of the Army's quartermaster corps. Others displayed the fleur-de-lis insignia of Dorian Fiske's Bon Marché Warehouse in Stateline. Here, the Rio Kid realized, was probably the concentration point for the smuggled supplies which unknown renegades had delivered to the Lion of the Lavabeds.

Even if he lost his life in the destruction of this supply dump, the Rio Kid believed it worth the gamble. The backbone of Captain Jack's resistance would be shattered if his store of ammunition, food and blankets was destroyed.

Rolling one of the oaken powder kegs away from the pile, Pryor kicked the barrel head until one slat gave way, spilling out a heap of black gunpowder.

Working with feverish haste, Pryor rolled the broken barrel over to the tiers of supply cases, making sure that the scattered gunpowder was in an unbroken heap. Then, rolling the barrel ahead of him, the Rio Kid trailed a line of gunpowder across the gallery floor and into the exit tunnel where the corpses of the Modoc guards lay stiffening.

The gunpowder was exhausted by the time the Rio Kid was halfway to the vast arch of daylight marking the mouth of Captain Jack's headquarters.

He was racing against time. Any moment might see the return of the Modocs, in which case he would be trapped without hope of escape. But the end result seemed to justify the risk.

Hurrying back inside the main cavern, the Rio Kid broke open another barrel of gunpowder and dumped it thoroughly around the stores. That done, he walked over to one of the guttering pine-knot torches which formed a ring around the center of the cavern and tugged it from its socket in the lava floor.

The pitch-laden torch trailed a feather of black smoke behind the buckskin-clad Army scout as he hurried toward the mouth of the cave. When he had reached the end of his line of spilled gunpowder, the Rio Kid halted.

He sized up the amount of space he had to cover to reach daylight. Through the open maw of the cave, past the sprawled body of the mule butcher whom Celestino had dropped with a hard-flung knife, he saw the looming mouth of a canyon which he judged would be the Flintridge, leading to Tule Lake and safety, carrying off the surplus waters of the sparkling Fountain of the Gods.

With a muttered prayer for the success of his plan, Bob Pryor dropped his flaming torch on the gunpowder. The black grains ignited with a blinding *whoosh* and a writhing snake of red fire began racing down the spilled trail of powder. When it reached the stacked barrels of explosive there would be a blast of earth-shattering violence.

Spinning on his heels, the Rio Kid sprinted down the cavern and out into the blinding sunlight. He was halfway across the open ground in front of the Great Cave when he was flung off his feet by a shattering detonation which seemed to split the whole earth to its very core.

Swallowing the initial blast of the detonating gunpowder there came a louder, more terrible roar of sound, numbing the Rio Kid's eardrums and shaking the ground under him.

As he dragged himself shakily to his feet, his body dashed by the spray of the artesian well, he saw the great arched mouth of the cave fracture slowly, then collapse inward as tons of loose, decomposed lava gave way under the impact of the mighty concussion in the bowels of the earth.

Within the space of an eye-wink, the gouting cloud of powder smoke spewing from the entrance of Captain Jack's hideout was stoppered up for all time by the collapse of the cavern roof. Grinning exultantly, the Rio Kid turned and headed at a run for the mouth of Flintridge Canyon.

Waiting for him were Winema and Frank Riddle and Celestino, who had witnessed the success of the Rio Kid's daring coup.

THE details of their wild flight down Flintridge Canyon's twisting course remained forever hazy in the memories of the four fugitives. Sunset glare was in their eyes when they finally emerged on the tule-bordered shore of the lake, wading out through the tiny opening of the Devil's Eye.

For a moment the Rio Kid experienced a pang of despair, believing that they faced a watery trap. High obsidian cliffs, glittering like black glass in the expiring rays of daylight, fell obliquely to the rippling waters of Tule Lake as far as the eye could reach to north and south.

It was Winema who pointed out the big pine snag which was floating in the tules at water's edge, and explained that the log could be made to serve as a crude raft to carry them to the western shore where a column of smoke lifted from the site of Miles Elkorn's sawmill camp.

"Let's get goin'," Bob Pryor said anxiously. "I think I see now where this terrible Modoc War can be finished off in a hurry. I've got to reach Mayor Williard's headquarters as quickly as I possibly can!"

* * * * *

Major Tracy Williard sat in his headquarters tent on the rim of the Lavabeds, poring over his campaign maps by the light of a lantern suspended from the ridge pole. His heart was heavy tonight. Before him were the reports of the artillery commander who had laid a barrage on what they believed to be Captain Jack's headquarters throughout the afternoon.

But scouting parties, visiting the target before sundown, had returned with the discouraging news that the attack had accomplished nothing. The campfire smokes which they thought marked the site of a Modoc encampment had turned out to be mere bonfires, set to draw the American's fire.

Williard looked up as his adjutant entered the tent, face flushed with excitement.

"The Rio Kid is outside with Miles Elkorn, sir," the adjutant said after they had exchanged salutes. "He says he brings urgent news, Major."

The old veteran of Gettysburg pushed aside his scriber and pencils and gestured vaguely.

"Send him in, Lieutenant. I must say I didn't expect to see Captain Pryor so soon, if ever."

The buckskin-clad Texan entered, and at a signal pulled up a chair in front of Major Williard's field desk. Miles Elkorn, the Yankee sawyer, remained in the background.

"Major, I've just returned from the Lavabeds!" the Rio Kid said earnestly. "Yuh'll pardon me if I sound like I'm boastin', and me a junior officer, but I believe I know a plan which will crush the Modoc defense and bring this campaign to an early end without a heap of losses for our side."

Major Williard listened in growing amazement as the Rio Kid recounted the rescue of Winema and Frank Riddle, the discovery of the Modoc's water supply in the Fountain of the Gods, and the total destruction of Captain Jack's supply depot in the recesses of the Great Cave.

Snatching up a pencil, Pryor sketched a map similar to the one which Winema had drawn in the dust of the Great Cave's floor.

"My plan is this, sir," the Rio Kid said excitedly. "Winema says that the Modocs don't guard Flintridge Canyon, believin' that Tule Lake makes it impossible to reach from the outside. But yuh could ferry a right big body of troops across Tule Lake under cover of darkness, and then—"

As the Rio Kid outlined his plan, Major Williard's gaunt features took on new hope. The way Pryor outlined his strategy, it seemed as workable as it was daring.

Troops filtering through the narrow opening of Devil's Eye could, with a minimum risk of detection, mass themselves within easy striking distance of the Fountain of the Gods, which was of necessity the focal point of Captain Jack's defense. Once their source of water was shut off by American soldiers, it would be only a question of time before the Modocs would be forced to surrender or make a break out of the Lavabeds. In that case they could be cut down by the troops which surrounded the area.

"Captain Jack is a prisoner in his own trap, Major," the Rio Kid said earnestly. "He wouldn't dream that your troops could invade the very heart of his stronghold till it would be too late!"

CHAPTER IX

Wagoneer Wanted!

MAJOR Williard tugged at his beard, dubious lights kindling in his red-shot eyes. He had listened thoughtfully to the Rio Kid.

"Your plan has but one drawback, Captain," he said gravely when Pryor had finished. "Judging from your report of the Modocs' strength, we'd need at least five hundred armed men to seize their water supply. That would not seriously drain my resources. But the question is —how could we secretly transport that many soldiers across a body of water as exposed as Tule Lake? How could my men reach this Devil's Eye you mention?"

The Rio Kid grinned, turning to motion Miles Elkorn up to the table.

"I've already fixed that," he said. "Elkorn here can build rafts at his sawmill and launch 'em in the lake within forty-eight hours. Next Wednesday night, accordin' to the almanac, the moon won't rise till midnight. Between sundown and eleven o'clock, Elkorn's rafts can cross the lake and unload five hundred men at the mouth of Flintridge Canyon. The rest is no more'n a matter of surprise attack on the defenders of the artesian well."

Major Williard glanced up at the lumber baron to whom he already owed so much in material aid.

"Elkorn, I respect your mature judgment," the officer said. "What do you think of the Captain's scheme?"

Elkorn's pock-pitted face wreathed in smiles.

"I'm no military man, Major," the sawmill man said, "but to my way of thinking, the Rio Kid has thought up a mighty fine scheme. I'd be willin' to wager everything I own that a week from now, yuh'll have pulled the fangs from yore Lion of the Lavabeds."

Williard consulted his calendar.

"This is Sunday night," he said. "Pryor thinks Wednesday is the logical time to pull this surprise raid. Could you have enough rafts built to transport my personnel and their supplies by Wednesday afternoon, Elkorn?"

The sawmill man nodded emphatically.

"I guarantee it, sir. I can have the mill work day and night, if necessary, to turn out the required dimension lumber."

"And the motive power for pulling the rafts across the Lake?"

Elkorn shrugged. "I've got work boats I use for towin' logs to the mill. Twenty oars to the boat. My sawmill crew can provide the towin' power to land the rafts wherever yuh say. With a tail wind we should be able to cross Tule Lake inside of two hours."

Major Williard got to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I shall issue the necessary orders at my end, if you will see to the construction of the rafts. I will summon in my staff officers and we'll hand-pick three companies of infantry to deliver the *coup de grace* to the Modocs."

Despite the weariness which bogged at his muscles, Bob Pryor felt exhilarated as he and Miles Elkorn went out to where their saddle horses were hitched.

"It galls the Major to see anybody he out-ranks come in from the outside and show him how to end this campaign, Kid," Elkorn chuckled as they headed back toward the sawmill camp. "Our advance word concernin' you hinted that yuh're somethin' of a genius. I, for, one am glad to admit it. . . ."

With three full days stretching ahead before preparations could be completed for the secret attack on the Lavabeds, the Rio Kid spent Monday at the Army camp, resting. On Tuesday morning he borrowed a cavalry pony and rode to Stateline, where he booked a room in a frontier hotel overlooking Lost River.

Winema and Riddle had returned to Stateline the day before, escorted from Elkorn's camp by Sergeant Walker Henry and a platoon of cavalrymen instructed to protect the interpreters against a possible kidnap attempt by the Modocs and their accomplices.

CELESTINO Mireles had not been idle following their Sunday night crossing of Tule Lake on a floating log. He had snatched a few hours' rest at the sawmill and then had proceeded northward along the rim of Tule Lake to recover his black stallion and the Rio Kid's

dun, Saber. The Mexican had stabled their horses at the Cascade before the Rio Kid's arrival in Stateline Tuesday noon.

The two partners chanced to meet on the main street, but gave no outward sign of recognition. Under the pretense of borrowing a match, the Rio Kid whispered to his Mexican comrade the name of the hotel where he had registered.

Pryor's reasons for not remaining at Williard's headquarters were vital ones. The identity of the renegades who had prolonged the Modoc War still remained unknown, and might remain so forever if the campaign should be mopped up before the week was over, as the Rio Kid hoped might be the case.

This meant that he had but forty-eight hours left in which to scout out clues to the source of the Modoc's smuggling ring. And Stateline seemed to be the logical starting point for such an undercover investigation. Despite the killing of the muleteer, the Rio Kid still included Dorian Fiske as a prime suspect.

That he was not engaged on a wild-goose chase, the Rio Kid was certain. The fact that he had been slugged and dragged up to the deserted shack on the hillside for questioning by an unknown white man was proof of that.

On the face of it, Pryor had reason to suspect that Dorian Fiske had been responsible for his kidnaping on the first night of his arrival in Stateline. But counteracting that line of reasoning was the fact that the Modocs had attacked one of Fiske's mule trains, bound to Major Williard's Army post with supplies, and had killed the muleskinner in charge. If Fiske were the trader guilty of smuggling trade goods into the Lavabeds, it did not seem logical that he would sacrifice a string of mules and one of his own employees to the Indians.

The Rio Kid returned to his hotel room at dusk after having spent the entire afternoon checking up on the various traders and freighting lines in Stateline. He found Celestino waiting for him, eyes flashing with excitement.

The Mexican was carrying a sheet of paper which, he said, he had torn off a bulletin board on the wall of the Golden Poppy Saloon when no one was looking.

"Thees may be important, General," Celestino said. "What you theenk, eh?"

The Rio Kid's lips moved silently as he read the bulletin:

WAGONEER WANTED!

The Bon Marché Warehouse has a Conestoga load of blasting powder consigned to a trading post at Jacksonville, Oregon, where it is urgently needed by settlers desiring to blast stumps from their farming lands along the Rogue River.

Owing to the danger of Indian attack in this territory and the impossibility of obtaining Army escorts for our wagons, the Bon Marché finds it impossible to hire a driver to transport the wagon into Oregon and deliver the load to its destination.

Anyone interested in this job should consult the undersigned without delay. Payment will be $500 in gold, $250 at time of leaving Stateline, balance payable on arrival in Jacksonville.

(signed) DORIAN FISKE, Prop.
Bon Marché Warehouse

The Rio Kid glanced up to meet Celestino's flashing eyes, sharing the Mexican's excitement.

"It's a cinch that Fiske has reason to believe the Modocs have an eye on that wagon load of blastin' powder, Celestino!" Pryor exclaimed. "Otherwise he wouldn't have any trouble hirin' one of his own wagoneers to make that Jacksonville run! If he aims for that cargo to fall into Captain Jack's hands, it's plumb natural he'd want an outsider to drive the wagon. Then it wouldn't matter to Fiske if the driver was attacked and killed en route!"

Celestino nodded, grinning boyishly.

"That ees what I thought, General."

"When did Fiske post this notice?" asked the Rio Kid.

Mireles plucked at the hem of his gaudy serape.

"Not an hour ago, General. I stole thees paper almost as soon as he tacked it up, *es verdad.*"

PRYOR paced the hotel room for a few moments, brows knitted in thought. Then he turned suddenly to his partner.

"Celestino, you're going to drive that load of blastin' powder out of Stateline tonight!" he said. "And yuh're not goin' to risk losin' yore hair to a Modoc, either. I'll have Sergeant Henry and his platoon of cavalrymen meet yuh outside of town and hide in the wagon, just in case yuh're attacked!"

Celestino Mireles checked the loads in his six-guns and listened carefully as the Rio Kid outlined further details of

his plan. As soon as the Kid had finished the Mexican was heading for the Golden Poppy Saloon to volunteer as a wagoneer in answer to Dorian Fiske's advertisement.

The Rio Kid hastened over to the shack on the outskirts of town where Frank Riddle and his Indian wife lived. He found the little cabin surrounded by a cordon of blue-coated cavalrymen, with Sergeant Walker Henry in charge. They had pitched their pup tents in the Riddle yard, making certain that the Modoc woman and her husband would be safe from possible kidnapers.

AFTER conferring with Winema and Frank Riddle, the Rio Kid called the sergeant inside the cabin and outlined his plan.

"You select a squad of eight men to slip out of town after dark and wait for Celestino's wagon to show up on the Jacksonville road," Pryor explained. "Of course, my hunch may be wrong. Fiske may be on the up-and-up, about his trouble, what with drivers refusin' to take wagons out unescorted into the Indian country. On the other hand, if Fiske expects his blastin' powder to be grabbed by the Modocs before it gets to Jacksonville, you and yore men may get some target practice."

Sergeant Henry, long since weary of routine garrison duty, rubbed his palms together excitedly.

Then his face fell.

"But what if your Mexican friend doesn't land the job?" he inquired. "Fiske might not want to hire a stranger."

Pryor tongued his cheek thoughtfully.

"That's possible, of course. If so, I'll ride out myself and call yuh back, Sergeant. But Fiske has no way of knowin' that Celestino and I are workin' together. We've been careful not to be seen together here in Stateline. If Fiske is guilty, he'd hire anyone—just so's it wasn't one of his own wagoneers."

After Henry had gone out to pick men from his platoon for the job ahead, Pryor turned to Riddle.

"I'll want you to keep a strict watch on Dorian Fiske's place this evenin'," he said. "If yuh see Fiske leave town, especially if he appears to be follerin' Celestino's wagon, notify me right away. I'll be in my room in the El Dorado Hotel."

CHAPTER X

Rouge River Trappers

WALKING back to the center of town, Bob Pryor was in time to see a canvas-hooded Conestoga drive out of the Bon Marché warehouse yard, with Celestino Mireles handling the six-horse team. After he had seen Celestino drive the wagon load of blasting powder across the river and disappear into the Oregon timber north of town, the Rio Kid ate a leisurely supper.

Plans were proceeding well. A mile up the road, Sergeant Walker Henry and his squad would board Fiske's wagon secretly. If Captain Jack's Modocs planned to intercept the Jacksonville wagon, they would receive a hot reception.

Pryor returned to the El Dorado Hotel and turned in early, satisfied that Fank Riddle would summon him in the event of anything suspicious on Dorian Fiske's part. He was sound asleep at midnight when he was awakened by a knock, urgently repeated.

Sliding out of bed, the Rio Kid reached under his pillow and drew out a six-gun, earing the hammer to full cock.

"Who is it?" he called softly.

"Riddle. I've got bad news for you, Captain."

Pryor unlocked his door and admitted the bearded interpreter. The man was obviously in a state of high agitation, breathing so hard he found it difficult to speak.

Obeying Pryor's orders to keep watch on the Golden Poppy Saloon, Riddle had spotted Dorian Fiske leaving town by a back road around ten o'clock, taking great pains that his departure go unnoticed by the street throngs.

"Fiske headed up the trail which leads to the Lavabeds, instead of crossing the river as you expected he might," Riddle said. "Since he was on foot, I decided to trail him." Riddle paused to recover his breath, ignoring the Rio Kid's nervous suspense. "A mile out of town," he went on then, "Fiske was met by a group of Modocs. I recognized Schonchin and

Boston Charley among them. I was able to get close enough to overhear their discussion. Dorian Fiske spoke the Modoc jargon better than I do. He's a quarter-breed."

A sense of foreboding seized the Rio Kid, bringing a fine film of cold perspiration from his pores.

"Yes—go on!" he whispered impatiently. "Why was Fiske havin' a secret confab with Captain Jack's lieutenants?"

Riddle came quickly to the point, and his report was dire in its potentialities of disaster:

"Fiske told the Indians that one of Miles Elkorn's lumberjacks had sneaked to town yesterday and told him that Major Williard plans a surprise attack on the Lavabeds before the moon rises on Wednesday night. The lumberjack said they were busy building rafts to ferry the soldiers across Tule Lake, to attack the Lavabeds through Flintridge Canyon."

The Rio Kid blanched, dumfounded by Riddle's words. Their closely guarded secret, shared by all the workmen in Elkorn's crew! And now in the possession of Captain Jack's hordes!

"Anyway," Riddle went on before the Rio Kid could speak, "Fiske said he had hired Celestino to drive a wagon load of blasting powder to Jacksonville, and he told Schonchin to attack the wagon and bring the powder back to the Lavabeds. The plan is to let Major Williard's men enter Flintridge Canyon, then they will blast down the walls of the gorge with Fiske's explosives, crushing the American soldiers to the last man!"

As Frank Riddle finished speaking, his silence was indicative that he shared Pryor's consternation.

With the Modocs warned well in advance of the strategy intended for their undoing, the whole plan was nipped in the bud.

The only good news Pryor could salvage from Riddle's report was confirmation of the fact that Dorian Fiske was guilty of a conspiracy with the warring Modocs.

There was plenty of time to call off the planned foray, thereby saving the lives of half a thousand hand-picked troopers. But of more immediate concern to the Rio Kid was the fact that Celestino's life was in danger. He had no way of knowing how many Indians would take part in the attack on the northbound wagon.

IN ALL likelihood, the Modocs would attack the wagon with a sizable force, since possession of the blasting powder was important to their plans.

"Listen, Frank!" Bob Pryor exclaimed. "I was thinkin' of ridin' down to Major Williard's and tellin' him to call off our plan for Wednesday night. But I think mebbe we may yet outwit the Modocs, thanks to yore good work tonight. . . What did Dorian Fiske do after he told the Indians of the blastin' powder shipment leavin' Stateline?"

Riddle shook his head despairingly.

"Fiske boarded Schonchin's pony and rode off with the Modocs," he said. "I couldn't follow. I thought it best to hurry back here and notify you what I had learned."

Pryor's lips compressed grimly.

"Good!" he said. "Now listen carefully, Riddle. We've got a chance to cook Fiske's goose and block Captain Jack's plans if we hurry. My plan is this—"

Lowering his voice almost to a whisper, the Rio Kid began to talk swiftly and earnestly. . . .

Ten miles north of the California boundary, Celestino Mireles found himself faced by another bend of Lost River. He pulled up the Morgans at the edge of the freshet-swollen torrent and turned to peer through the puckered oval opening of the Conestoga.

Back in the gloom, squatting on the barrels of blasting powder which made up the mudwagon's cargo, Sergeant Walker Henry and twelve of his troopers were invisible in the darkness.

"Thees *rio,* she looks bad to cross at night, senor!" the Mexican said apprehensively. "Do you know eef the ford ees safe een thees high water?"

The cavalry sergeant wriggled forward over the load and peered out at the rushing river, the stars reflected in its sluicing current.

"It's not as bad as it looks, Celestino," Sergeant Henry reassured. "I'd advise crossing. After all, Fiske gave you orders to travel all night and camp in the morning. Just keep to the ruts and head for those twin boulders on the far bank. I've seen smaller wagons than this one make the ford."

Celestino shrugged and picked up his whip. The jouncing Conestoga splashed

out into the stream and the Morgans surged ahead through belly-deep water, their hoofs finding solid footing on the gravel bed.

Icy water surged at the wagon box and spume dashed over the backs of the toiling team, but in a few moments the water shallowed perceptibly. The prairie schooner lurched up the north bank and followed the Jacksonville road out onto a grassy bench hemmed in by towering sugar pines.

A short distance beyond the river, the alert Mexican spotted a campfire twinkling against the background of the forest. Nerves on edge, Celestino whispered a warning for the cavalrymen inside the Conestoga to ready their guns for trouble.

Steering his team along the road which passed close to the campfire on its way into the forest, the Mexican saw two burly figures hunkered beside the fire, frying fish over the red coals. One of the campers got to his feet and strode out to meet the wagon, lifting an arm to the driver.

Loosening a six-gun in holster, Celestino braked the dripping Conestoga to a halt.

"Howdy," greeted the bearded man. "Yuh don't figger on goin' to Jacksonville with this mudwagon, do yuh?"

The Mexican thought fast. The question sounded innocent enough, but he would be in a predicament if these buckskin-clad men were looking for a ride north. He could not risk having anyone discover the presence of Sergeant Henry and his troopers hiding in the Conestoga.

"*Si*," he answered uncertainly. "*Porque no*—why not?"

The trapper shook his head.

"My pardner and I just come from Jacksonville," he said. "Yuh can't make it. There's a bad rockslide up the road a piece. Yuh'll have to wait for daylight before yuh could shovel through. Take my word for it."

CELESTINO muttered his thanks. This was a situation he had not anticipated. The trapper was obviously trying to help him.

"Tell yuh what, son," the bearded man volunteered. "Stop yore wagon on the bench yonder and graze yore team overnight. My name's Curt Condon and my pardner yander is Jeb O'Malley. We're trappers from the Rogue River country. Come daylight, we wouldn't mind ridin' up to the slide and lendin' a hand shovelin' a clear right-o'-way for yore wagon."

Celestino Mireles gathered up his lines.

"*Muchas gracias*, Senor Condon," he said. "I weel camp here for the night as you say."

Condon grinned.

"We got a mess of river trout fryin'," he said with bluff Western hospitality. "Yuh're welcome to our vittles."

Celestino sawed his lines and circled the wagon around toward the river, withdrawing fifty yards from the campfire before halting the Conestoga. With luck, he would be able to spend the night with the Rogue River trappers without them learning of the cavalrymen who rode as secret passengers in his wagon.

"Don't worry about us, Celestino!" whispered Sergeant Walker Henry from the hooded interior of the wagon. "Me and my men will stand guard all night, in case any Injuns show up. You go ahead and eat a double portion of trout for us, eh?"

Celestino climbed down off the wagon and unhitched the horses. Stripping the harness from the Morgans, he ran a catch rope through their halters and headed off down the slope toward the river.

After watering his stock, the Mexican selected a patch of lush grass and set about picketing each of the Morgans for the night, picking up sticks and driving them into the turf with a rock.

He was heading back toward the hooded Conestoga when Curt Condon and Jeb O'Malley sauntered up to meet him.

"Ain't yuh afraid the redskins might sneak up durin' the night and try to run off yore team, son?" O'Malley asked. "Yuh better stake 'em out between our campfire and the wagon."

Celestino shook his head, hitching his gun-belts. A slight tremor of apprehension shot through him as he saw the two Rogue River trappers had moved to bracket his either elbow.

"I weel spread my bedroll nearby," he said. "I—"

Celestino was caught unprepared for what happened next. Moving in unison, the buckskin-clad men lashed out legginged feet to trip the Mexican, throw-

ing him heavily on his back. Before he could reach for a gun, Condon smashed him on the point of the jaw with the butt of a Dragoon revolver.

"This is the Rio Kid's Mexican pard, right enough!" Condon grunted, staring down at the unconscious wagoneer. "Fiske was right, risin' to the bait and lettin' this feller drive that blastin' powder out of Stateline, just like he didn't suspect nothin' out of the ordinary."

Jeb O'Malley stooped to hoist Celestino's inert form over his massive shoulder.

"Fiske always plays it close," O'Malley grunted, as they headed toward the river. "He didn't dast let one of his own drivers take this freight north tonight. Wouldn't look right if Cap'n Jack choused the load and didn't scalp the driver."

O'Malley waded out into the icy waters of Lost River, with Condon splashing at his side. At midstream the current was hip deep, but the water shallowed off as they reached the south bank. O'Malley lowered Celestino to the ground.

As if by prearranged plan, three riders emerged from the timber to meet the men in buckskin. The starlight revealed them as Dorian Fiske, the Modoc sub-chieftain Schonchin, and the Lion of the Lavabeds himself, Captain Jack.

"Heap good!" grunted the Modoc chief, speaking in pidgin English for the benefit of the self-styled "trappers." "This is the Mexican who rides with the Rio Kid. I take um back to Lavabeds tonight."

CAPTAIN JACK squatted down to run his scarred hand over Mireles' thick black hair.

"You've never had a Mexican's scalp in yore collection, eh, Kintupash?" chuckled Dorian Fiske, speaking in the Modoc tongue. "Make shore yuh lift his hair before yuh roast him alive."

Captain Jack stood up, peering across the river to where the canvas hood of the Conestoga glowed faintly in the dancing rays of the campfire.

"You haul up powder to Lavabeds before dawn?" Captain Jack inquired, turning to Condon and O'Malley.

The men glanced at Fiske, who launched into an unintelligible discourse with the Modoc chief. When they had finished, Fiske turned to his men.

"The Indians will be waitin' for the wagon at the North Pass tomorrow," Fiske explained. "Captain Jack has given me a password for yuh to give when the sentinels challenge yuh. He can't take any chances of a slip-up, with what he has at stake."

The two "trappers" nodded, waiting for Fiske to go on.

"The password is *'miculick'*," Fiske said. "Got it? *Miculick*. That's Modoc lingo for 'We come as friends.' Yuh're to drive the blastin' powder up a canyon straight to Captain Jack's headquarters, and help the Indians set the fuses and plant the charges along the rimrocks of Flintridge Canyon. Savvy?"

O'Malley grinned. "Leave it to us, boss," he said.

Fiske shook hands with the Indians, who proceeded to lift Celestino Mireles' limp form aboard one of the horses. In minutes the Indians had vanished into the trees.

Fiske shuddered. "I'd hate to be in that Mexican's shoes," he muttered. "But I reckon the Rio Kid put him up to it. Come on, men. Let's get that team hitched up."

CHAPTER XI

Death on Lost River

FISKE mounted his sorrel gelding and rode down the slope toward the river ford, following his two henchmen who waded out into the river. The gun boss of Stateline was in rare good spirits tonight. No one in the settlement would cast a suspicious eye in his direction when the word got around that another of the Bon Marché's freight wagons had been seized by hostile Modocs en route to Jacksonville.

Several days would elapse before the news got to Stateville that the wagon had mysteriously vanished on its way to the Oregon settlement. Major Tracy Williard would have no cause to connect the robbery of ten barrels of blasting powder with the surprise attack which the Army was scheduling for tomorrow night.

As masterful as Robert Pryor's scheme had been to strike in force at the very nerve center of Captain Jack's defenses in the hitherto impenetrable Lavabeds, Fiske knew that the wily Lion of the Lavabeds would arrange an even more clever rebuttal for the harassed Army.

With the walls of Flintridge Canyon mined with explosive charges, the invading infantrymen would never know what happened to them tomorrow night, let alone having any survivors to bring back a report on what had caused the wholesale slaughter.

Dorian Fiske was whistling a tune as his gelding splashed up on the north bank and headed toward his Conestoga, silhouetted against the dancing flames of the campfire built at the edge of the timber.

The possibility that danger waited at the prairie schooner did not occur to the Stateline outlaw boss. O'Malley and Condon had encountered no difficulty in halting the young Mexican, with their fabricated story of an avalanche blocking the Jacksonville road up ahead.

All that remained to do now, was hitch up the team and see the two buckskin-clad men on their way toward the Lavabeds with the blasting powder. Then Fiske would return to the Golden Poppy Saloon without anyone in Stateline having been aware of his absence.

Fiske's horse was flanked by his two henchmen as they approached the grazing team. O'Malley and Condon picked up the lead ropes and started for the wagon, leading three horses each.

They were halting alongside the harness which Celestino Mireles had piled beside the wagon tongue when a calm voice challenged them from the interior of the covered wagon:

"Get your hands up, gentlemen! You're covered."

Fiske stiffened in saddle, jerking his head around to stare in the direction of the voice. The first thing he saw was star glow shining on the leveled barrel of an Army carbine, held by a lean, blue-coated figure framed in the oval opening of the Conestoga's hood.

Protruding through the opening were the muzzles of three other rifles.

"Walker Henry!" gasped Fiske, groping his arms skyward. "What in thunderation—"

The cavalry sergeant climbed out on the wagon seat.

"Fiske!" he said, lowering his gun. "I didn't— What became of Celestino Mireles? He went out to water the team and didn't come back. What happened to him?"

A furtive grin relaxed Dorian Fiske's evil countenance. In the darkness, then, Sergeant Henry had not witnessed the Mexican's capture or transfer across the river.

"I decided to ride out and overtake my wagon, Sarge," Fiske explained, lowering his arms. "This freight is valuable and I didn't know the Mexican from Adam. I jumped at the chance to hire the first driver who volunteered. But on thinking it over, I—"

IT WAS Jeb O'Malley who interrupted Fiske's plot to ward off Henry's suspicions. Thinking that the sergeant was off guard, O'Malley snaked a Dragoon .44 from holster and brought it up, spitting flame.

The trapper's hasty shot plucked a hole in the canvas hood of the wagon. Instantly, the night resounded to a point-blank hail of shots as Henry's troopers opened fire from inside the wagon.

A bullet whipped the beaver hat from Fiske's head. O'Malley went down, drilled between the eyes. Curt Condon, following his partner's lead, had a six-gun blazing in his fist.

With a wild yell, Fiske wheeled his horse to trample O'Malley's corpse and spurred toward the river in getaway, followed by Walker Henry's fast-triggered carbine. Bullets droned past Fiske's ears, but in the dim light the fleeing outlaw made an elusive target. He reached the near bank of Lost River unscathed and sent his gelding hurtling into the water.

Terror clawed at Fiske's vitals as he sent the horse slanting across the white water. Celestino or the Rio Kid had planted an ace in the hole, hiding an escort of troopers in the northbound wagon!

Fiske chewed out an oath as his horse veered off the ford and plunged into swimming water. He gave the gelding its head, clinging to the saddle-horn and cantle rim to keep from being unhorsed by the surging waters.

He knew his outlaw reign in Stateline was finished by tonight's fiasco. Ser-

geant Henry's testimony would link him with the Modocs, even though actual proof was lacking. Worse yet, the failure to deliver the barrels of blasting powder to Captain Jack and his waiting redskins in the Lavabeds put his Indian friends in dire peril.

The gelding's hoofs got purchase in the shelving mud and waded ashore on the south bank. Across the river, cavalry guns were shooting ineffectually in his direction, the slugs going wild. Fiske reined his pony up to the Stateline road and headed south.

Then, at the edge of the timber, new disaster loomed. Three riders emerged suddenly in front of him, galloping toward Lost River, completely blocking the road. In the dim light, Fiske recognized the trio as he halted his gelding. The central rider was the Rio Kid. He was accompanied by the Indian girl, Winema, and Frank Riddle.

"Fiske!" Pryor shouted, recognizing the bedraggled figure on the mud-spattered gelding. "What's goin' on?"

The gun boss of Stateline went berserk, then. He whipped a Colt from holster and notched his gunsights on the Rio Kid's husky frame, squeezing trigger at point-blank range.

But immersion in the icy waters of the Lost River had jammed the gun's mechanism. Before Dorian Fiske could twirl the locked cylinder with his hands, the Rio Kid's .45s were blazing.

A bullet caught Fiske in the chest, jolting him back in saddle. A second slug drilled his cheekbone and ripped out through the base of his skull, terminating the outlaw's violent career in a swirl of gunsmoke.

With a gagging sigh, Fiske slid limply from stirrups. His gelding, panicked by the lead streaking past its muzzle, stampeded down the road past Frank Riddle's horse and was lost to view in the timber.

The Rio Kid swung out of stirrups, pouching his smoking sixes as he knelt to examine Fiske's body. Then he came to his feet, cocking an ear to the shouting across the river.

"Celestino!" Pryor yelled, cupping hands to his mouth. "It's me, *compañero!* Don't shoot! We're coming across!"

Sergeant Walker Henry and three of his troopers were waiting on the north bank when the Rio Kid and his trailmates splashed across the ford.

"Celestino's disappeared, sir!" the sergeant panted, grounding the butt of his rifle.

PRYOR felt his veins jelling as he listened to Henry's account of the two Rogue River trappers halting the wagon at the edge of the forest, and Celestino's subsequent disappearance.

"I figger the trappers must have trailed him down to the river and knifed him, Captain!" Henry concluded. "I've got two of my men scouting the river bank in search of his body. But they might have tossed him into the river. I—I'm afraid we failed you and Celestino tonight, sir."

Bob Pryor shook his head grimly. Two cavalrymen approached in the darkness to report that they had found no trace of the young Mexican, dead or alive.

A shout from one of the soldiers at the wagon came ringing through the night above the rush of Lost River.

"One of these trappers is still alive, Sarge! He claims Celestino was carried off by the Modocs!"

The Rio Kid spurred into a gallop, skidding Saber to a halt when he reached the Conestoga. His swift glance photographed a tableau as he stepped out of stirrups. Two soldiers were holding the team while another, wearing a corporal's chevrons, was kneeling beside the groaning figure of Curt Condon. A few feet away, Jeb O'Malley lay rigid in death.

Condon was propped up against the hickory wagon tongue. It was obvious that he was mortally wounded and sinking fast. Blood leaked from bullet wounds in his chest and abdomen, but his eyes were open and he appeared to know who the Rio Kid was.

"What did yuh say happened to Celestino?" Pryor demanded. a note of raw fury cracking in his voice.

A gagging cough brought crimson bubbles to Condon's mouth. He wiped off his beard with a buckskin sleeve and his panting whisper was barely audible to Pryor.

"Cap'n Jack an' Schonchin—are on their way to the Lavabeds—with your pard," Condon whispered. "Cap'n Jack —knew he—was a spy workin' for Army."

Pryor felt his backbone turn to an ice pole. Celestino a prisoner of the Modocs

was far worse news than if he had learned that his loyal and courageous companion from the Rio Grande had been killed outright.

WINEMA and her husband rode up and dismounted in time to hear Condon resume his confession.

"My sand is runnin' out fast," the outlaw wheezed. "I'll try—make up for—my part in this—business. Never did cotton to workin' for redskins—but Dorian Fiske—our boss—he was quarter-blood Modoc—hisself."

The Rio Kid bent an ear to catch the dying man's whisper.

"Fiske wanted blastin' powder—to reach Cap'n Jack. O'Malley an' me to haul it—through North Pass—deliver it to Modocs. Cap'n Jack—give Fiske password—to get us through Injun lines. *Miculick*—password."

Condon's voice trailed off in a paroxysm of coughing which left him spent and ashen, hardly breathing. The Rio Kid stirred restlessly, impatient with the irrelevant turn Condon's talk had taken.

Fiske's plans, the mumbojumbo of Modoc passwords, these were not the things that he wanted to hear from Condon's lips.

"Listen to me, fella," the Rio Kid said anxiously. "I want to know if Dorian Fiske is the man who has been supplyin' the Modocs with smuggled goods all along? I've got to know for shore. Fiske is dead, fella. Nod yore head if you can't talk."

Condon settled back against the wagon tongue, fighting for breath.

"Fiske—wasn't—man you want," was the dying man's surprising statement. "Fiske was just go-between—for Cap'n Jack's real tillicum. The man—you want—"

Condon's head sagged on his chest and his whisper trailed off into nothingness, choked by a gurgling rattle in his windpipe.

The Rio Kid reached out to feel for a pulse in Condon's wrist, convinced that the man was dead. But he felt a faint throb of life still moving through the artery.

"He's lapsed into a coma," Pryor said, standing up. "Winema, will you stand by in case he comes to? It seems Dorian Fiske ain't the renegade Major Williard is after!"

CHAPTER XII

Desperate Plan

LOOSENING the rawhide thongs which laced the unconscious trapper's buckskin jacket to ease the man's breathing, the Indian girl took her place at his side.

The Rio Kid moved off into the darkness, feeling the need to be alone, to wrestle with the overpowering grief which the news of Celestino's fate had brought home to him.

He turned over in his mind the statement which the dying trapper had made regarding Fiske's villainy. And suddenly, out of the chaos of tragedy which bogged his thinking, the Rio Kid conceived an idea.

He called to Frank Riddle, saw the interpreter detach himself from the silent group of soldiers and walk over to him.

"Frank, yuh've risked yore life a good many times since the Modoc War began," the Rio Kid said. "I'm about to ask yuh to side me in a scheme which mebbe will cost both of us our lives. But it should go a long ways towards windin' up the Modoc War and bringin' peace back to this country."

Winema's husband nodded soberly. "I am at your service, Captain," the interpreter said.

The Rio Kid drew in a deep breath.

"Captain Jack is expectin' this wagon to show up at the north end of the Lavabeds," he said. "Two of Fiske's men are supposed to be aboard that wagon. Yuh heard Fiske's man mention the password which would put 'em through the Indian sentry lines?"

Riddle nodded. "'*Miculick*'," he said. "That's Modoc patois for 'We come as friends'."

The Rio Kid rubbed his stubbly jaw thoughtfully, shaping up details of his hazy, still ephemeral plan in his mind before outlining it to Riddle.

"Why can't you and me deliver them barrels of explosives to Captain Jack tomorrow?" he asked. "We could make out we were Fiske's men. You could shave off that beard and change clothes with the dead man yonder. I doubt if

the Modocs would recognize yuh as Winema's husband. And none of the Indians know me."

Riddle eyed the Rio Kid sharply.

"I am willing to do anything to help the cause," he said, "but why play into the Indians' hands by delivering that blasting powder, when you know it will be used to destroy hundreds of Major Williard's men tomorrow night?"

The Rio Kid smiled bleakly and reached out to lay a hand on the interpreter's shoulder.

"We'll deliver a wagon load of barrels to the Lavabeds, Frank," he explained, "but the barrels won't have no blasting powder in 'em. We'll load 'em with plain sand."

The doubt left Riddle's face then. He turned to peer through the darkness to where his Indian wife maintained her vigil beside Curt Condon's unconscious form.

"Winema will have to accompany us, Captain," he said. "She is the only person outside the Lavabeds who knows the lay of the land. She will guide us through North Pass."

The Rio Kid hesitated, momentarily deciding to call off the whole scheme rather than involve a woman in such a dangerous undertaking. Then he realized that Winema had dedicated herself to bringing the bloody Modoc conflict to a stop, on behalf of her tribesmen who gave a cruel and sadistic chief their blind and unthinking obedience.

"Good," Pryor said, grinning with relief. "Keep our plans to yoreself, Frank. I'm believin' Sergeant Henry and his men are reliable, but we'll take no chances."

As they rejoined the silent group by the wagon, Winema looked up from her place beside the prostrate Condon.

"He is dead, sir," the Indian girl reported. The Rio Kid accepted the news philosophically. Condon had carried into eternity the secret of who had been the guiding hand back of Dorian Fiske's smuggling activities with the Indians.

"Sergeant," Pryor said, turning to Walker Henry, "detail a couple of yore men to dig graves for these renegades. Yuh'll find shovels lashed to the wagon box yonder."

WHILE the troopers were engaged in shoveling out two graves, the Rio Kid unbuckled his saddle-bags from Saber's kak.

"That'll do, men," Pryor said, as the soldiers prepared to lift the dead men into the excavations. "We'll finish the burial, Riddle and me. Sergeant, I want you to head back to Major Williard's right off. Take our three horses. We'll ride the wagon back to town."

"Yes sir," Sergeant Henry responded, saluting.

"Tell Major Williard that there haven't been no changes in our main plan, Sergeant," the Rio Kid went on. "Yuh can tell him that I'll take the responsibility for the Riddles' safety, if he asks yuh about quittin' yore post in Stateline."

Two corporals mounted the Riddles' horses while the privates shouldered their rifles and fell into squad formation. Winema stared inquiringly at Pryor but said nothing. She knew from the gravity on her husband's face that something was up.

The soldiers marched briskly toward the river, Sergeant Henry in their lead mounted on Saber. That was a concession on the dun's part, and as if he understood the gravity of the situation. For it was a rare thing that Saber even let a stranger come near.

From his saddlebags the Rio Kid removed a leather case containing soap and razor, which he handed to Riddle.

"Shave off them whiskers, Frank," he ordered the interpreter. "Yuh'll likely find hot water over at the trappers' camp yonder. Yuh can tell Winema what's up while yuh're shavin'."

When the Riddles had departed in the direction of the dying campfire, Pryor busied himself removing the buckskin jackets and mountaineer boots from the two dead men. Then he finished burying Fiske's henchmen and went on to the job of hitching the six Morgans to the Conestoga.

That done, Pryor mounted the wagon and drove down to the edge of Lost River. He unsnapped the end gate of the mudwagon and rolled the heavy powder barrels off onto the ground one by one.

He had removed the wooden plugs from the bungholes of the barrels and was emptying the heavy black grains of blasting powder from the first barrel into the river when Frank Riddle and Winema rejoined him. Glancing at Riddle, Pryor grinned. Without his heavy

sideburns and long beard, the interpreter looked like a different man, his face appearing sharp and narrow.

"I feel like a plucked goose," Riddle chuckled, stroking his white cheeks. "I hope I will appear like one to the Modocs."

Winema and her husband fell to work emptying the gunpowder barrels into the river. When they were at work on the last barrel, Pryor poured a sizable mound of powder out on the ground, for future use.

Refilling the barrels with riverbank sand was the next job. Winema, with typical Indian ingenuity, fashioned a funnel from a slab of thin bark and held it in position over the bungholes of the barrels while Pryor and her husband shoveled coarse sand into the casks.

The pale promise of dawn was staining the eastern horizon by the time they had loaded the barrels, filling the area under the bunghole openings with real gunpowder. Then, hammering the wooden stoppers back into place, the two men rigged two poles from the ground to the wagon bed to serve as a ramp and rolled the sand-laden barrels into the Conestoga, using a rope parbuckle.

"We won't reach the entrance to North Pass by daylight, as Fiske's men would have done," Pryor said, climbing into the driver's seat. He had already deposited there the clothing he had removed from Condon and O'Malley. "When the Modocs halt us at the edge of the Lavabeds I'll tell 'em in sign language that we broke a wheel and had to stop and fix it up."

Winema, whose presence on the trek was imperative for guide purposes, concealed herself under an Army blanket among the powder barrels. Her husband joined the Rio Kid on the driver's seat and they started their perilous journey. Soon they had forded the river and were heading southeastward toward the blazing sunrise and the Lavabeds. . . .

THE California sun was nooning by the time Winema had directed the plodding team into the northern outskirts of the Lavabeds. Realizing that they were under surveillance of hidden Modoc sentries, the Rio Kid and Frank Riddle had donned the heavy fringed hunting coats they had taken from Fiske's slain partners.

Winema, keeping out of sight inside the hooded Conestoga, gave Pryor directions which enabled him to choose the vast lava-walled chasm which was North Pass. Without the Indian girl's expert guidance, they could easily have driven the wagon into any one of a hundred blind cul-de-sacs where it would have been impossible to turn around and retrace their route.

"I thought Williard's troops kept a cordon around the entire Lavabeds," Pryor remarked moodily as he tooled the lurching wagon up a long grade. "I don't see how we come this far without sightin' an American patrol."

The Rio Kid broke off as the lead horses snorted in alarm and came to a halt. Out of a fissure in the North Pass wall stepped two big Modoc warriors, clad only in breech clouts and moccasins and carrying American Army rifles.

In response to their guttural challenge, the Rio Kid stood up in the wagon box, grinned broadly, lifted an arm in the sign of peace and called loudly:

"Miculick."

The password which Captain Jack

[*Turn page*]

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had given Dorian Fiske had a magic reaction on the two braves. Their hostile visages relaxed and they began an excited discourse in their native tongue, gesticulating and pointing toward the east.

"I'm not supposed to savvy Modoc—which I don't!" the Rio Kid muttered from the corner of his mouth. "What are they sayin', Frank?"

Riddle grinned bleakly.

"They say we were expected at dawn, but that we can proceed to the Fountain of the Gods without worrying about the American troops. It seems that Schonchin and his warriors started a battle east of here at dawn and drew Williard's guards away from North Pass."

CHAPTER XIII

Password to Peril

CRACKING his long whip over the leaders, the Rio Kid sent the weary Morgans lunging into their traces. The Modoc sentries stepped aside as the wagon rumbled past their lookout post and headed on up the grade.

Wheel tracks were visible on the scarred lava, indicating that other wagons had been to the Lavabeds before the occupants of the Conestoga. The grade leveled off and they began a tortuous route, following the ridge of a twisting plateau which led toward the heart of the *pedregal.*

Once, passing the mouth of a side gulch, their ears caught the far-off sound of sporadic gunfire. That would be Schonchin and his warriors, engaging the American soldiery in a deceptive action to clear North Pass for the transit of their wagon.

The sun was westering in their eyes when the Rio Kid recognized a pinnacle of rock. It was, he knew, a landmark near the site of Captain Jack's headquarters at the mouth of Flintridge Canyon.

He halted the blowing team and poked his head inside the Conestoga, smiling at Winema huddled back among the sand-filled powder barrels.

"I can make it on to Captain Jack's headquarters from here, Winema," he said. "You can hide yoreself till we get back with the wagon. It wouldn't do for the Modocs to catch yuh. It would give the whole trick away."

Tears misted Frank Riddle's eyes as he helped the pretty squaw out of the wagon. He embraced her tenderly and they whispered together for a few moments, man and wife taking leave of each other for what might well be the last time.

Riddle's clean-shaven face showed no sign of emotion when he climbed back aboard the wagon. Winema had slipped off into the tangled lava formations to await their return.

The Rio Kid whipped the team into motion, conscious of a dull, throbbing ache of suspense knotting his stomach. They were nearing the den of the Lion of the Lavabeds now, would soon be running the gantlet of Modoc eyes.

Captain Jack was expecting two of Dorian Fiske's wagoneers to deliver this blasting cargo to his stronghold. What if he knew Condon and O'Malley personally? But the Rio Kid had weighed that possibility before embarking on this mission, and was resigned to the gamble.

A quarter of a mile from the demolished Great Cave, Indian lookouts caught sight of the plodding prairie schooner approaching through the lavabeds and heralded its approach with exultant whoops. By the time the wagon drew in sight of the Fountain of the Gods, the Rio Kid and Frank Riddle saw that the majority of Captain Jack's fighting men were awaiting their arrival.

Pryor's face gave no hint of the inner strain he was under as he halted the team on the open ground between the ruined cavern and the artesian well. Hundreds of Indians thronged around the Conestoga, lifting the canvas flaps to peer at the barrels which the wagon contained.

Then an aisle formed in the milling mass of redskinned warriors and the Rio Kid found himself face to face with the Lion of the Lavabeds himself.

Captain Jack lifted a hand in greeting, his coal-black eyes shuttling between the Rio Kid and Frank Riddle. The interpreter had prudently climbed back into the wagon, knowing that his

wife's cousin might recognize him without his beard.

"How," Captain Jack greeted the wagon driver. "You come heap late. Fiske promise wagon get here after dawn."

The Rio Kid wrapped his lines around the Jacob's staff and clambered down the front wheel to stand within arm's reach of the Lion of the Lavabeds.

A NONCHALANT grin was on Pryor's dust-grimed face. Captain Jack had shown no suspicious sign upon their arrival, patent evidence that he did not know the men Dorian Fiske had assigned to bring the wagon into the Lavabeds. And he had never seen the Rio Kid before. As long as Frank Riddle kept out of sight inside the wagon, all would be well.

"Have um heap trouble with wheel," Pryor alibied, indicating with elaborate pantomime that the front wheel of the mudwagon had come off the axle en route, forcing a delay while they made repairs. "We unload powder, get um back to Stateline, huh?"

Captain Jack's dour face eyed the Rio Kid inscrutably.

"Injun no savvy blasting powder," he said. "Fiske say you help um Modocs fix um powder along Flintridge Canyon."

The Rio Kid nodded.

"We fix um," he said, and clambered back into the wagon, intending to drive his heavy load of barrels closer to Flintridge Canyon before unloading.

In the act of unwrapping his lines, the Rio Kid paused. Staring off across the heads of the assembled Modocs, he caught sight of a lone figure lashed to a wooden post out in front of the avalanche débris which blocked the mouth of the Great Cave.

It was Celestino Mireles, awaiting torture by fire. Even as the Rio Kid stared, he saw his loyal Mexican comrade flash him a swift grin of recognition.

The Rio Kid tore his gaze from Celestino and turned to release his hand brake. He saw Captain Jack staring at him quizzically, and he jerked a thumb in the direction of the torture stake.

"Fix um to fry Mexican boy, huh?" he asked, with a forced chuckle.

Captain Jack rubbed his war-painted cheek with a knuckle. "Are you same paleface who captured him last night?" the Lion of the Lavabeds demanded.

The Rio Kid nodded, letting a hand slide in the direction of the Colt strapped to his right thigh. He was not aware that Captain Jack had seen Celestino's captors the night before.

Now, if ever, was the high moment of their danger. If he saw the slightest hint of suspicion in the Modoc chieftain's attitude, he intended to fire at least one shot before Captain Jack gave the signal to seize him. And that one bullet would down the leader of the Modocs!

"Shore," he said grinning. "Mexican boy yonder drive um wagon from Stateline to my camp on Lost River last night."

Captain Jack nodded, leaning on his grounded rifle. "Mexican boy burns tonight," the Modoc answered. "After blasting powder send paleface soldiers to happy hunting grounds."

Whipsawing his lines, the Rio Kid started his wagon, skirting the artesian well. His exhausted team, famished for water, broke into a trot as Pryor steered in the direction of Flintridge Canyon.

Out of range of Captain Jack's vision, the Rio Kid breathed easier. The crisis was past. The Modocs had accepted them as trusted whites, colleagues of Dorian Fiske. Frank Riddle had succeeded in keeping out of sight of the one Indian most likely to see through his smooth-shaven disguise—Captain Jack.

Spending the rest of the day assisting the Indians in setting the "powder" charges at strategic points along the rimrocks of Flintridge Canyon was exactly in line with the Rio Kid's desires. It meant he could stay in the vicinity of Captain Jack's stronghold, close enough to make an attempt to save Celestino Mireles' life if an opportunity presented itself. It must—or he would make one.

A dense fog was beginning to gather over the Lavabeds, a natural phenomenon which had harassed Major Tracy Williard's offensive tactics in the past, adding to the cover which the Modocs enjoyed inside the Lavabeds. Tonight, however, the fog would be doubly useful in masking the over-water approach of Williard's raft-borne troops.

THE poor visibility might present difficulties in landing the rafts at the Devil's Eye. But unless a wind

sprung up to roughen the waters of Tule Lake, Pryor had every reason to believe that the Army's part in the operation would be carried off successfully.

Two score of husky copper-skinned Modoc warriors followed the wagon to a point immediately in front of the canyon which was to be Williard's route of approach to the Fountain of the Gods this coming midnight. The Rio Kid halted his wagon, set the brakes and swung to the ground, followed by Frank Riddle.

"Anybody here speak um English?" Pryor asked. He knew it would be imprudent to converse through the medium of Frank Riddle. White men conversant with the Modoc tongue were rare, and Riddle was known to be one of the few interpreters outside the Modoc tribe.

"Me spik um heap good," announced a grinning young warrior in his late teens. "We help um carry round boxes."

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The Rio Kid unchained the tail-gate and directed the Indians to unload the powder barrels. Riddle climbed into the wagon and emerged with a box of fuses and pliers for cutting the detonating devices into proper lengths.

The remaining hours of the afternoon were busy ones for Riddle and Bob Pryor and their Indian porters. At regularly-spaced intervals along the canyon walls, they buried barrels which the Indians, jabbering among themselves, spoke of as "thunder boxes." To each barrel, the Rio Kid affixed a fuse.

Around dusk, when the last barrel of river sand had been placed where, had it been explosive, its detonation would have crumbled the decomposing lava walls into the canyon, the Rio Kid summoned the Indian helpers about him for a demonstration.

Opening the last barrel, Pryor poured out a cupful portion of black powder from the small amount of explosive which he had used to mask the contents of the sand-filled barrels. Pouring the heavy black kernels of powder on a flat rock, Pryor fixed a length of fuse thereto, took out flint and steel and lighted the end.

The Indians chattered excitedly as they saw the wormlike length of fuse spit off a stream of sparks, fuming white smoke as its core burned toward the small heap of powder. The black stuff ignited with a blinding flare and sent a great mushroom of white smoke puffing off into the fog-heavy atmosphere.

Used to nothing more powerful than gunpowder, the Modocs fell back in momentary panic at the surprising volume of the explosion caused by so small an amount of powder. Then, reassembling a few yards away, they talked excitedly among themselves.

"They're going back to report on the white man's thunder to Captain Jack," Frank Riddle interpreted their jabberings for the Rio Kid's benefit. "Your demonstration was a big success, Captain."

Preceded by their Indian helpers, the Rio Kid and Frank Riddle started back toward Captain Jack's stronghold, following the twisting rim of the Flintridge gorge. So far as the Indians were concerned, all was in readiness for tonight's secret raid by Major Williard's forces.

According to conversation which Riddle had overheard among the Indians during the afternoon, Captain Jack would assign a warrior to each powder barrel. When the American soldiers were strung out in full force in the canyon below, the Modoc war drums would beat a signal. Each warrior would light his fuse and then flee for safety. In a matter of moments, the white man's "thunderbolts" would blast the walls of Flintridge Canyon into the chasm, crushing the white soldiers under thousands of tons of plummeting lava!

Then, to celebrate their victory over the white enemy, Captain Jack and his *Maklak* tribesmen would launch a celebration with firewater and victory dances, culminating with the torture of their white captive, Celestino Mireles.

"I'll have to report to Captain Jack when we get back," the Rio Kid said. "You get into the wagon, Frank, where yuh won't be seen at too close range. I reckon we're to head back toward Stateline now that our powder-plantin' job is finished."

Returning to the head of the canyon, Frank Riddle climbed into the waiting wagon while the Rio Kid followed their Indian porters into camp.

CHAPTER XIV

White Traitor

GLOWING torchlight fires illumined the open area in front of the Great Cave, and it appeared to Bob Pryor that the Lavabeds were aswarm with Modocs. On the outskirts of the war camp squaws had pitched their teepees. Obviously, Captain Jack had summoned his entire tribe to witness the final crushing overthrow of the invading whites. Indians of all ages, from papooses to white-haired oldsters too infirm for active fighting duty, had assembled at the Fountain of the Gods to witness the blasting of Flintridge Canyon and the celebration to follow.

"Major Williard's goin' to have a battle on his hands," the Rio Kid thought soberly as he headed toward a central bonfire built near the artesian well, where the tribal chieftains were congregated. "But when that blastin' powder fails to explode, the Major at least will have the advantage of surprise."

The Rio Kid halted just outside the range of firelight where the chiefs were gathered in pow-wow. He hoped against hope that Captain Jack would not insist on his facing the other chiefs, for the presence of Boston Charley and Hooker Jim in their midst would be fatal. The two chieftains would be sure to recognize him as the white man they had planned to torture in the cabin above Stateline a week ago.

Pryor breathed easier when he saw the Lion of the Lavabeds move out of the council circle and walk toward him, accompanied by the Indians who had spent the afternoon planting barrels of supposed blasting powder along the canyon walls.

Captain Jack's cruel visage was wreathed in smiles as he held a hand out to the Rio Kid.

"Heap good, paleface friend!" the Modoc leader grunted. "You go now to Fiske. Tell um Injun have big victory tonight. Tell um Fiske he get heap big pay for help."

The Rio Kid bowed. A single question now might solve the enigma which Curt Condon had carried with him in death—the name of the renegade for whom Dorian Fiske, the gun boss of Stateline, was a mere underling. But the Rio Kid dared not voice that question. Every moment he remained in Captain Jack's camp was at the risk of exposure—and torture to follow. Obviously, his mission as wagoneer and powder-setter was over, and Captain Jack was dismissing him.

"I go," Pryor grunted, lifting his arm in the tribal salute. "Me tell um Fiske what you say. Heap big massacre tonight, huh?"

Captain Jack turned on his heel and stalked back to rejoin his chiefs. From the corner of his eye, Pryor saw a number of fat Modoc squaws waddling out to meet Frank Riddle in the wagon, carrying baskets of food for their white benefactors.

On the pretense of threading his way through the throngs of Modocs massed between the hemming lava walls, the Rio Kid pushed his way toward the torture stake where Celestino Mireles was being held prisoner. In the clotted shadows, he aroused no attention as he approached his Mexican friend.

His throat constricted as he saw that a great heap of brush and dry tules, hauled up from the shore of the Lake, had been piled as high as Celestino's waist. Fuel for the torture fires which Captain Jack would kindle personally, if the Modocs' plan for a victory celebration materialized!

A group of chattering Indian children, borrowing the sadistic traits of their elders, were dancing in serpentine around the torture stake where Celestino stood, pelting the helpless Mexican with willow switches and small pebbles of lava.

Celestino looked gaunt and wretched as the Rio Kid approached. Pryor's angry cry silenced the dancing children, who withdrew in awe of the white man.

"You weel help me, General?" moaned Celestino, his dusky face a mass of bruises where hard-flung pebbles had lacerated his cheeks.

A VAST pity welled up in the Rio Kid as he gazed at his Mexican friend. His hand closed over the hilt of his bowie knife, and he fought back a wild impulse to slash Celestino's bonds

and make an attempt to shoot his way to freedom, back to back.

"Yuh're not scheduled to be burned till after the Major's troops are buried alive in the canyon tonight, Celestino," he whispered rapidly. "I haven't got time to explain now, but that won't happen. By midnight, Major Williard's troops will be wipin' out these savages."

Celestino grinned through puffed and bleeding lips.

"*Esta bueno*," he whispered dully.

"I'm here with Frank Riddle and Winema," the Rio Kid went on. "We're supposed to drive the wagon out of the Lavabeds, but don't worry, *amigo*. We'll be around close. I'll show up when the fun starts tonight."

A big Modoc buck, carrying a pistol in either hand, moved toward the torture stake as he recognized the identity of Celestino's visitor. With a parting word of assurance for his friend, the Rio Kid walked over to the guard.

"Heap big fire tonight, huh?" Pryor grinned.

The Indian shrugged, his dark face immobile. Leaving him, Pryor soon was elbowing his way through the squaws massed around the waiting Conestoga. He climbed into the wagon, finding the seat stacked high with baskets and pottery dishes filled with Indian food.

"Let's go, Frank!" Pryor muttered, with a final backward glance at the Indian assemblage. "We'll drive the wagon back into the Lavabeds a ways and pick up Winema. Then I aim to double back and be ready to help Celestino when the ruckus breaks loose at midnight." . . .

Miles Elkorn's sawmill camp was a beehive of activity as a rolling inshore fog brought premature darkness to the California timber country. Working day and night for the past three days, Elkorn's crews of buckers and fallers had hewn trees in the neighboring forest and snaked the big logs by means of ox teams to the waiting sawmill.

There, the logs had been converted into whipsawed planks and heavy dimension lumber. Shifts of carpenters had fashioned the massive timbers into vast rafts, working under cover of Elkorn's stockade to prevent their activity being seen by hostile spies.

Now, with darkness settling over the land, the tension deepened as Miles Elkorn took personal command of dragging the big rafts down to the edge of Tule Lake and launching them.

Under cover of the night, Major Tracy Williard marched into the sawmill camp with three companies of picked infantrymen, each man carrying sixty rounds of ammunition and cooked rations for two days. The army commander and Miles Elkorn conversed briefly by the lake shore as the troops stood at ease in platoon formation.

Out in the shallow water where the rafts floated side by side, workboats were drawn up with twenty of Elkorn's burly lumberjacks in each boat, their oars ready to supply the motive power to tow the loaded rafts across the intervening body of water to the rim of the Lavabeds.

"The rafts are ready—the boatmen are ready," Miles Elkorn reported. "I couldn't build a dock out into the lake for fear of tippin' off the Indian scouts on the far shore that somethin' was up. Everything has been done under strict secrecy restrictions, Major."

The veteran infantry commander grinned in the foggy darkness. "Thank God for the help of a citizen of your patriotism, Elkorn," he said fervently. "How about this fog? This Devil's Eye may be tricky to locate."

Miles Elkorn shook his head. "I'll go with yuh across, Major," he volunteered. "I know Tule Lake like the palm of my hand, fog or sunshine."

DURING the next hour, the troops, maintaining strict silence and under orders not to light cigarettes or pipes, marched squad by squad down to the water's edge where Elkorn assigned them to rafts, a hundred men to each raft.

When five of the rafts were loaded with personnel, the sixth was stocked with ammunition and provisions by quartermaster privates from the Rogue River supply base eighty miles north. By ten o'clock, Major Williard and Miles Elkorn waded out to board one of the tow boats, and all was in readiness.

Units of the Oregon Mounted Militia, the California Volunteer Rifles and regular Army troopers of the 21st Infantry were aboard the rafts, keyed to a high pitch and grateful for the privilege of being selected to participate in the historic midnight assault on the Lavabeds. For, if the Rio Kid's plans went as scheduled, the Modoc tyrants would be

destroyed for all time.

Miles Elkorn called a low order through the swimming fog. Oarsmen dipped paddle blades into the icy water. Tow hawsers tightened. Heavily-armed troopers braced themselves as the big rafts started moving away from the shore.

Shrouded in cottony fog which hugged the surface of Tule Lake, the rafts moved six abreast across the placid waters. Five hundred troopers closing in on the Lavabeds with the stealth of a cougar stalking its prey!

Unerringly, Miles Elkorn guided the water-borne raiders to the precise point on the eastern shore where the Devil's Eye spilled out the trickle of artesian water from the Modocs' Fountain of the Gods, a mile inland by way of Flintridge Canyon.

Towboats scraped their keels on the submerged shelf of mud which the Devil's Eye stream had built out into the Lake. Troopers adjusted their rifle slings and, at an order from their lieutenants, stepped out into knee-deep water and moved ashore, lining up in battle array.

"From here on it's yore party, Major," Miles Elkorn said, as he and the Army commander waded through the shoulder-high tules. "I'll stay here with my boatmen. Good luck."

Major Williard reached out to grip the lumber king's hand in the darkness. The landing had been made with ease, and only the trilling of mud frogs broke the fog-shrouded silence.

"Thanks for everything, Elkorn. I'll see that President Grant hears of the part you played in this coup tonight."

Elkorn's pock-scarred face froze into grim lines as he saw Major Williard move off to confer with his staff officers. In a few minutes, the troopers would enter the Devil's Eye and deploy up the twisting length of Flintridge Canyon.

Elkorn went back to the lake's edge to where his boatmen were congregated.

"Row back to the sawmill, men," he ordered. "I'm goin' along to see the fun."

The loggers grunted assent and saw their employer head off toward the looming cliff.

But Miles Elkorn did not seek out Major Williard. Unseen in the darkness, the California lumber baron scuttled through the looming cavern which was the Devil's Eye and headed up Flintridge Canyon at a run.

A half-hour later, winded by his exertion, Miles Elkorn was climbing out of the canyon mouth to face the roaring beacon fires of Captain Jack's stronghold. Indians stationed along the rimrocks called out greetings to Elkorn as they recognized the towering giant in the red mackinaw and coonskin cap. Then Miles Elkorn was shaking hands with Captain Jack, addressing him in the halting Modoc language which he had picked up.

"All is ready, Kintupash!" Elkorn panted, gesturing toward the canyon. "The American troops are even now sneakin' up the canyon. Yuh're all set to spring the trap?"

Captain Jack nodded, exposing crooked fangs in a triumphant grin.

"The gods be thanked for your warning us of this trap, my friend," the Lion of the Lavabeds said. "The blasting powder is waiting to be set off by my warriors. Not a white soldier will escape alive!"

CHAPTER XV

The Stars and Stripes

NIGHT was alive with an electric tension, as the news spread among the Modocs that the white enemy was even at this minute advancing up Flintridge Canyon, seeking to strike a paralyzing blow at the Modoc fastness—but nearing their own doom with every forward step!

Miles Elkorn sauntered over to the torture stake where Celestino Mireles stood helpless in his bonds, waist-deep in tinder-dry fuel which would char him to a crisp before another sunrise.

"Senor Elkorn!" the Mexican gasped, recognizing the smallpox-pitted face leering at him in the firelight.

"Yes, my spy friend!" taunted the sawmill boss. "Yuh didn't expect to see me at yore farewell party tonight, eh?"

Celestino could only stare at the white traitor, as comprehension of Elkorn's perfidy slowly penetrated his brain.

"Then—then you are the *maldito* hombre who captured the Rio Keed that night in Stateline!" he accused thickly. "Eet was you who questioned heem een that leetle *cabana* on the heelside!"

Elkorn nodded, thrusting a briar pipe between his teeth and lighting it, his face like a satan's mask in the match glow.

"Yes. From the first I've passed along Major Williard's secrets to my red friends in the Lavabeds, Celestino. Dorian Fiske and I have a great stake in seein' the Modocs win this war against the whites."

Mireles shook his head uncomprehendingly. "But you are a white!" he protested. "You play the traitor to your own breed!"

Elkorn laughed harshly. "I can build up an empire of my own," the traitorous sawyer, explained, "as long as other whites don't get a chance at this land. With the help of the Indians I can become the most powerful man on the Pacific Coast!"

Elkorn broke off. His ears had caught a remote throb of Modoc tom-toms, coming from the lookouts posted along the rim of Flintridge Canyon.

The signal for Captain Jack's warriors to light the fuses of the powder barrels scattered along the south wall of the canyon! The signal which warned the waiting Modocs that their white enemy was approaching their stronghold!

Along the dark-shrouded rimrocks, a dozen warriors fired their fuses and scuttled to safety in the rocks. But the Modoc gods were angry tonight. Something was wrong. The fuses sizzled their way into the buried barrels—and spewed out harmlessly!

The thumping of war drums wavered off, ceased. The tense, expectant Indians massed around the Fountain of the Gods heard another sound welling from the throat of Flintridge Canyon—the brassy notes of a bugle sounding the charge, its strident blast megaphoned into a trumpet of doom by the sounding-boards of the cliff walls.

And then, out into the glare of firelight, burst a line of blue-coated soldiers behind fixed bayonets, fanning out to block off the Indians' only avenues of retreat from the council ground. In their vanguard came a trooper flanking Major Tracy Williard, bearing the regimental colors of the U. S. Infantry and the glorious banner of the Stars and Stripes!

Captain Robert Pryor, crouched down on a ledge overlooking Captain Jack's camp, leaped to his feet as he saw Major Williard's charging troopers fire a heavy salvo at the dismayed ranks of red-skinned warriors who faced them.

Six-gun palmed, the Rio Kid skidded his way down the steep lava slope, unnoticed by the panic-stricken Modocs who saw their best fighters being decimated by the concentrated fire of American riflemen.

Sprinting past the debris-stoppered mouth of the Great Cave, the buckskin-clad Texan snatched a knife out of its scabbard. As he raced up to the torture stake Celestino Mireles stood shouting encouragement to the American soldiers who poured out of Flintridge Canyon in a never-ending stream.

A SLICING thrust of his knife slashed Celestino's bonds in two, and then the Rio Kid was kicking the kindling wood away from his partner's body to get at the ropes which pinioned his legs.

"Senor Elkorn ees the man you want, General!" Celestino yelled in Pryor's ear, as the Rio Kid thrust one of his Colt .45s into the Mexican's hand. "He ees here een camp tonight, *si*!"

Indescribable confusion reigned in the Indian stronghold. Warriors, breaking the chains of their paralysis, opened fire on the swarming infantrymen who were boiling in a blue tidal wave out of Flintridge Canyon. But the redskins' counter attack was poorly organized, and they began throwing down their rifles in surrender as they saw their fellow braves being slaughtered like flies.

Miles Elkorn, seeing his dreams of empire going up in gunsmoke and the flash of red-dripping bayonets, sprinted toward a break in the cliffs which would lead him to a dubious sanctuary back in the Lavabeds. But the fleeting traitor to his country's cause found his path blocked by a familiar figure in buckskins, sided by a grinning Mexican in the garb of a Chihuahua *hidalgo*.

The Rio Kid's thumb was poised on gun hammer as he saw the pock-scarred sawmill boss skid to a halt in front of him, horror in his eyes as he realized his escape was cut off.

"Get yore hands up, Elkorn!" the Rio Kid's shout sounded above the roar of pitched battle behind the sawyer. "I'll see yuh hanged along with Captain Jack and yore other *compadres*!"

With a hoarse oath, Elkorn whipped back the tails of his mackinaw and pawed a six-gun from holster. He swung into a killer's crouch as he opened fire on the spread-legged Army scout before him, saw his bullets knock lava chips from the cliff behind Pryor.

With grim precision, the Rio Kid tripped gun hammer. Through founting gunsmoke he saw Elkorn go down on one knee, fighting for the strength to lift his fuming Colt while his left hand clawed at a blood-spouting bullet-hole in his chest.

"I wasn't—born to hang—Rio Kid!"

Pryor held his fire as he saw the gun slip from Miles Elkorn's nerveless fingers. With a convulsive shudder, the lumber king pitched face down in the dirt, a puddle of crimson spreading under his corpse.

The Rio Kid glanced around, to see that Celestino Mireles had left his side. A dozen yards away, he saw the Mexican from the Rio Grande engaged in a slugging match with a tall Indian from whose short-bobbed hair jutted a red-tipped eagle feather.

Captain Jack, deserting his tribe in their hour of doom, had been blocked in getaway by the Mexican he had planned to scalp and burn alive before this fateful night was over!

The Lion of the Lavabeds lashed out frantically with his tomahawk, having no time to pull the six-gun from his baldric. But the war ax failed to strike his elusive target. With powerful lefts and rights, Celestino Mireles was chopping Captain Jack's ugly visage into a bloody ruin of pulped flesh and dented bone.

Not until he had beaten the Modoc tyrant into unconsciousness did Celestino glance around to see that the Rio Kid had witnessed the unthroning of the Modoc war lord.

Order was slowly coming out of the frenzied chaos around them. The last of Major Williard's troops had stormed out of the canyon, eager to do battle but finding only a host of surrendering, thoroughly beaten Indians facing them.

Warriors and their squaws and sobbing children were being marshaled into trembling crowds surrounded by cordons of bayonets. The acrid smell of gunpowder blended with the odor of the Modocs' victory fires. The ground around the Fountain of the Gods was littered with dead and dying, with redskin casualties outnumbering the American invaders fifty to one.

SCHONCHIN, Boston Charley, Hooker Jim and lesser chieftains of Captain Jack's band were already being manacled with "Oregon Boots" around their legs. Army surgeons moved among the fallen fighters, administering first aid to wounded infantrymen.

Then the bugle trumpeted the cease fire order, and a brooding silence settled over the Lavabeds to symbolize the stirring end of the Modoc campaign.

Frank Riddle and Winema came down from the heights where they had witnessed the climactic struggle, to watch Celestino Mireles dragging Captain Jack over to the spot where Sergeant Walker Henry was questioning Schonchin and the other chiefs.

"This is a sad hour for my people," Winema said gently, "but it is also the beginning of their redemption. Without evil leadership such as my cousin Kintupash's, they will settle down on their hunting lands and prosper as never before."

The Rio Kid grinned down at the comely Indian maiden who had cast her lot with the white settlers as a means of helping her tribesmen to a better destiny in the long run.

"General Grant and the white settlers of Oregon and California will never forget yore part in tonight's victory, Winema and Frank," Captain Bob Pryor said. "I'm shore of that."

He did not know it, but the Rio Kid spoke more truly than he knew. A grateful Oregon legislature was to vote a lifelong pension to Winema, the "Oregon Pocahontas," and her loyal husband.

Major Tracy Williard, bleeding from a superficial arm wound, walked over to where the Rio Kid and Celestino stood side by side. The Army commander, instead of being flushed with victory, shook his head sadly as he stared at the corpse of Miles Elkorn.

"He had my complete trust and confidence," said the disillusioned officer. "Without his smuggled supplies, Captain Jack would have been forced to

surrender months ago. So much expenditure of blood and treasure could have been averted if traitors such as Miles Elkorn were never born."

Williard shook himself out of his mood and gestured toward Captain Jack and his captive chieftains.

"A circuit court in Jackson County has indicted those Modoc chiefs to stand trial for killing white settlers," he said. "They will pay for their crimes on the gallows."

FOUR months later, in October, Williard's prediction was to come true when Captain Jack and his lieutenants, the scourge of the Oregon country, met their doom at rope's end.

"Words are futile things at a time like this, Captain Pryor," Williard said. "General—President Grant knew what he was doing when he assigned you to my command. History books of the future will give you the lion's share of the credit for ending the Modoc War, I am certain of that."

The Rio Kid shook his head.

"Thank yuh, Major," he said. "But Celestino and I do our work under cover so far as the Army is concerned. As a matter of fact, we already have orders to report to Fort Laramie up in Wyomin' as soon as this job is finished, to carry out another assignment. I only hope we'll be as fortunate in our new commandin' officer as we have been with you, Major Williard, in trappin' the Lion of the Lavabeds."

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As Chuck walked into the firelight, both men sprang to their feet

NORTH to the ARKANSAS

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Chuck Bledsoe may have been green when the treacherous ramrod buncoed him, but he learned things mighty fast!

THEY had strangers for supper that night, two furtive cowboys who had ridden in from the north. He watched them eat, wondering why he disliked them on sight, then watched them go off on the other side of the chuck wagon to talk to Jorgenson, the trail boss. They were still talking there, the three heads in earnest conversation, when he caught his night mount from the remuda and rode off to relieve old Sim Giles. He found the old man riding slowly around the herd and singing in a cracked voice about how good little dogies always laid down at night and went to sleep and didn't cause overworked cowpunchers no trouble whatsoever. Sim had made up the song himself.

"Hi-yah, Chuck," the old man sang

out when he approached.

"Hi, old-timer. How're they going?"

"So-so," the old man answered. "I been singin' to them but they ain't beddin' down right. They don't like them clouds over there." Sim Giles nodded toward the long bank of clouds that were obscuring the setting sun.

Chuck Bledsoe looked at the clouds, mentally estimating their potentialities for rain, which he expected, and for thunder and lightning, which he expected but didn't want. The clouds were piling up over there and they had wind and lightning and thunder in them, if he was any judge.

"That danged yaller steer found hisself a snake and tried to get spooky about it," the old man's voice continued. "Lucky I got him interested in me before he got the rest of the bunch excited. If I had my way, I'd beef that yaller brute. He ain't good for nuthin' except startin' runs and we can't afford any more runs if we're gonna get this herd on the north bank of the Arkansas in time to meet the colonel's contract. How's Jorgy feelin'?"

"All right, I guess," he answered quickly, a little startled at the question. "He stowed away his supper like it tasted good to him." Jorgenson had been complaining of stomach pains for several days. "Why do you ask?"

"I was wonderin' if he had ever missed a meal on account of them pains," the old man answered. "I ain't never seen him miss one."

"Come to think of it, neither have I," Chuck said. He looked sharply at Sim Giles but the gathering darkness hid any expression that might have been on the old man's face. "You got something on your mind, old-timer!"

"Nope." the old man said, his voice decisive like he had made up his mind he had said all he was going to say. "Anything happen at the chuck wagon?"

WITH the abrupt changing of the subject, he knew the old man had more on his mind than he was telling. He also knew there was no point in asking what it was. Sim Giles would talk when he was ready or not at all.

"Nothing happened. We had a couple of visitors for supper though."

"Visitors?" The old man's voice was sharp.

"Uh-huh," Chuck answered. "Couple of sharp-nosed coyotes who looked like they was trying hard to smell something out but didn't know exactly what it was. You think we're going to get more rain?"

"Where'd they come from?" Giles asked.

"I didn't question 'em." He kept his voice indifferent. "Seems to me like it's rained every single day since we started this drive."

"All right," the old man said, irritated. Then his voice changed. "We got ten more days to deliver these cows. And I don't know how many more miles. Jorgy has brought us west of the regular trail and I ain't never been this way before." He hesitated and his voice dropped into silence. "Shucks, it ain't my worry. These are yore dogies, now, Chuck. You watch that yaller steer. If he budges, put a bullet between his eyes and swear it was an accident. Yore uncle won't know we never delivered that critter, or care." He rode off, heading for the chuckwagon, and chow. Chuck Bledsoe took over the job of riding night herd.

This was a trail herd going north, the cattle were already sold and the price agreed on, the contract written, sealed and signed, calling for delivery of the cattle on the north bank of the Arkansas by June 15, at which time payment would be made to his uncle, Colonel Bledsoe, the owner. Chuck remembered how pleased the Colonel had been when he had contracted for the sale of this herd.

"It means we'll pay off our back notes, boy, and have a little left over to run the ranch the rest of the year. It means you'll have a ranch to inherit, Chuck."

The catch was, Chuck thought, that the price of beef had dropped. Winters, when he had bought this herd, had gambled that the price of range stock would go up. Guessing wrong, he would now find it very profitable to get out of his contract.

Singing as he rode the herd, he wondered how a cattle buyer who was not honest would go about getting out of an unprofitable contract.

This was his first trip with a trail herd. He was barely eighteen but he was close to a man in build, if not in experience. Colonel Bledsoe had sent him along to get some experience that

a Texas cattleman needed. Part of that experience was the knowledge of how to sing a restless herd to sleep at night.

He rode in a slow circle, singing. They were beginning to lie down, he saw, and he wondered again at the miracle of the human voice lifted in song, a miracle mighty enough to bring a feeling of peace to a restless steer. Old cowhands couldn't explain how singing soothed a herd, but they accepted that fact and sang the old trail songs and little dogies, somehow reassured that all was well with their world, lay down and went to sleep.

Lightning fingered the horizon with bright flame. He pulled his slicker from behind his saddle, slid into it, went on riding and singing. A wind began to move in the darkness, sweeping across the rolling country with quickening speed, and thunder muttered in the distance. He sang louder, wondering when Jorgenson was going to send out the rest of the hands, to help him in case a stampede started.

He listened for the sound of horses in the darkness, wondered why it did not come. Rain began to fall, slowly, gently, from the black sky. The yellow steer got up and bawled. Or he thought it was the yellow steer, and sang louder. The steer went back to the bed it had picked. He sighed with relief.

They were going to stay put, they were going to sleep through the storm like good little dogies. Lightning fingered the earth again and thunder rolled its iron-wheeled cart across the sky and still the herd did not move from the bedding grounds.

Rain rolled down his slicker and his horse picked up its ears and whinnied.

The night blossomed with fingers of flame and revolver shots rolled through the darkness.

"Hey!" he screamed.

The shots ripped the night again.

He heard the sound that a great number of sleeping cattle make when they are suddenly awakened and get up from their beds. He knew the herd was moving. He jerked his own revolver from its holster, fired blindly in the direction from which the shots had come.

PICTURES of the two strangers who had eaten supper with the trail crew flashed before his mind. Two revolvers had flashed out there. The plan had been to stampede the herd. The plan had succeeded. The cattle were already moving.

Normally, a trail herd will stampede back in the direction from which it has come. This herd had come from the south. The revolver shots had come from the west. He was to the south of the herd when it began to move. He emptied his gun, yelling at the top of his voice.

Frightened steers veered away from the sound. He plugged cartridges into the gun, emptied it again. Anyone watching him would have thought he was deliberately trying to stampede the herd, certainly a strange action on the part of man whose duty was to protect the herd. Anyone thinking that would have been half right. The herd was going to stampede in spite of anything he could do to stop it. All he could hope to do was control the direction in which it went.

"If you got to run, you four-legged devils, run *north*!" he screamed. Back of him he heard other guns exploding, knew that Jorgenson had finally sent out the whole gang. If they had been there earlier, they might have stopped the stampede. Nothing could stop it now.

He filled and emptied his gun again. Lightning walked across the sky overhead. It revealed the rumps of cattle in front of him instead of the heads.

He was still screaming, "Run, you four-legged devils, run!" and emptying his gun as fast as he could re-load it, when the trail crew caught up with him. The thunder of hoofs was a vast roar reaching up to the clouds in the rain-swept sky as the herd stampeded, north. . . .

The next morning all but two of the tired crew sprawled around the fire that the cook had miraculously gotten burning. The two missing members were holding a herd of tired cattle far to the north. If the crew was tired, that fact did not seem to dampen their spirits. On the contrary, most of them seemed in a better humor than usual this morning.

"The way I figure it, that stampede gained back most of the ground we lost," old Sim Giles said, grinning. "We're just about where we ought to be if we're goin' to make the river by June fifteen. First time I ever heard of a

stampede doin' anybody any good." The old man blew steam from his cup of scalding hot coffee.

Chuck Bledsoe, stretched out on a tarp, his head pillowed on his saddle, said nothing. Old Sim Giles knew why the herd had gone north although he didn't know why the run had started. Up to now Chuck had been sort of tolerated because he was the nephew of the owner. This morning, as a result of his fast thinking in turning the steers north, the crew had accepted him as one of them.

"How'd they happen to start to run?" Jorgenson asked. The trail boss had eaten no breakfast this morning. He had sat by the fire, wrapped in his own gloomy thoughts. Now he spoke for the first time.

Chuck Bledsoe shrugged. "How does any stampede start?" he asked.

Jorgenson accepted his answer without comment, as did the crew. The mystery of *why* a steer decided to run had never been settled, Chuck knew. A wolf, a coyote, a snake, the shaking of a slicker, thunder, lightning, a change in the wind, or his own perverse nature, were all good reasons.

"Thought I heard some shots," Red Chambers said.

"Probably did," Chuck answered. "I did a lot of shootin' before I got 'em headed north."

Nothing more was said on the subject. Before the appetites of the hungry crew, the piles of flapjacks that Ransome, the cook, had prepared, disappeared as if by magic.

"I thing I'll try some of that coffee now," Jorgenson said. Ransome brought him a tin cup full of the black brew. The trail boss set the cup on the ground and waited until the coffee cooled, then put it to his lips and drank. Almost instantly he spat the coffee on the ground and grabbed his stomach.

"Well that settles it," he said, getting to his feet. "When I can't even drink coffee without my stomach startin' to hurt, I know it's time for me to go see a sawbones. I'm leaving."

THE rattle of knives and forks on tin plates went into silence when Jorgenson made his announcement. The most important man on a trail drive was the trail boss. He was the captain of a team, he gave the orders, he supplied the savvy and the know-how, and he took the responsibility. A good trail boss knew how to keep his men happy and how to keep them working. It was a job that required a hard man, a driving man, a patient man and a tactful man.

Jorgenson was a good trail boss. He knew the trail, he knew cattle, and he knew how to get the most out of his men. Now Jorgenson was leaving and the crew was like a team without a captain.

The loss of their boss in the middle of a hard drive was about the worst thing that could happen to a trail crew.

"You—you're quittin'?" Sim Giles said, as if he could not believe his ears.

"I am," Jorgenson said flatly. "I've put this off as long as I could. Now I got to go. I got my own health to think of. Ransome, roll up my bedding for me. Red, catch Mose out of the horse herd for me."

As the two men obeyed, Jorgenson went to the chuckwagon, unlocked the big wooden box that held his personal possessions, took from it the small metal box that contained the papers relating to the herd. The men watched in silence. Chuck Bledsoe did not lift his head from the saddle but inside he was as tight as a coiled spring.

"Well, Jorgy, if you got to go, you got to go," Sim Giles said. "The question is—who's goin' to run the outfit?"

"I've decided that," the trail boss answered. Carrying the metal dispatch box, he returned to the fire. "There's only one man for the job and that's the nephew of the owner. Bledsoe, you're ramrodding this outfit from here on. Here's the bill of sale and the contract for the delivery of the herd."

As Chuck Bledsoe sat up, the dispatch box thudded on the ground beside him. "I think it would be better for Sim Giles to be boss," he said. The surprise he felt showed in the tones of his voice. He was the youngest man on the crew. He had had no experience on trail drives. In spite of this, Jorgenson was nominating him as boss! Why? Remembering the two visitors they had had for supper, remembering the shots that had started the stampede, he suspected he knew why.

"No," Jorgenson said, his voice hard and hostile, in the morning air. "You're the nephew of the owner and that makes

you boss of this trail crew from here on."

Jorgenson turned away. Fifteen minutes later, he rode out of camp, heading south. Gray haired Sim Giles came over to where Chuck Bledsoe sat on his saddle.

"If this had happened yesterday, I'd a-said it killed our chances of ever delivering this herd on time," the old man said. "Today I got other ideas on the subject."

"What's the difference between yesterday and today?" Chuck questioned.

"Last night," the old man answered. "Chuck, every man here knows them two coyotes we had for supper deliberately spooked that herd last night. We also know you stampeded the herd north, the way we want to go. We also figure them two coyotes paid Jorgenson to quit. We also figure Jorgenson named you boss because he thought you are too young for the job of holding a crew together and that you're certain to fail. Yesterday I'd a-thought he was right. Today I got other ideas. Today this crew is back of you one hundred per cent. We're goin' to get this herd through, in spite of Jorgenson's treachery— Ain't that right, men?"

Chuck heard the ragged cheer that went up from the listening crew. Like the way song soothes a restless steer, the sound of men cheering him, telling him they were back of him, made him feel good clear down to the soles of his boots.

For five days the herd moved steadily north. It rained almost constantly but in spite of the weather, they made good time. The crew worked as they had never worked before. Chuck Bledsoe, keeping his mouth shut and giving no orders of any kind, worked twice as hard as any of them. Because of this fact, they were his men as possibly no other trail crew ever belonged to the boss to command. When they got no orders, they invented their own. Old Sim Giles joyfully beefed the yellow steer and the herd moved. Always, as they moved north, the whole crew was aware that they were being followed. Two riders who kept out of sight as much as possible and who could not be approached, hung on their flanks.

"Lawson and Bruckles, or I'll eat my hat," Red Chambers told Chuck. "If I get them between my gun sights. there's goin' to be two dead buzzards along this trail."

CHUCK said nothing. Lawson and Bruckles were the two men who had eaten supper in camp the night the herd had been stampeded.

On the night of the sixth day after Jorgenson left, with four more days to go and the success of the drive certain, Chuck Bledsoe awakened to the feel of a rough hand on his shoulder and the agitated voice of Lee Quarles, the horse wrangler, grating in his ear.

"Wake up, Chuck," Quarles was wailing. "The remuda's been stolen! I hobbled the leaders and turned the others loose last night, same as always. When I went out to get 'em, they was gone. Somebody cut the hobbles and drove off the whole bunch."

Chuck Bledsoe was already pulling on his boots and buckling his gun around his waist. The crew, awakened by Quarles' voice, were gathering around him. The dawn light in the sky reflected their feelings. Without horses, the herd was paralyzed, the cattle could not be moved.

"A trail outfit lives on its horses," Sim Giles muttered.

They had the wrangler's horse, which had been tied near the wagon, they had the two horses the night men were riding, they had four mules that were used to haul the chuck wagon.

Chuck Bledsoe took a Winchester carbine from the wagon, slid it into the boot of the horse Quarles had been riding, hoisted himself into the saddle. The ground was soft from the almost constant rain.

Tracks in the soft ground showed him where the horse herd had fed during the night. The tracks also showed where the animals had suddenly broken into a gallop. This was where the thieves had cut the hobbles.

The tracks led due west.

This, Chuck Bledsoe thought, is the third way of getting out of a contract.

All day long he trailed the stolen stock. He estimated the horses had been driven away before midnight. The tracks revealed the thieves were keeping the horses moving fast. Where the ground was soft and he was certain of the sign, he followed at a gallop. There were places where the tracks were not clear. Here he had to go slowly. Then

the tracks cut the sign of another trail herd but forunately the herd had passed three or four days previously and the almost constant rain had washed out the tracks of horses and cattle.

The thieves turned and followed the broad path the trail herd had taken, apparently in the hope that their tracks might be lost in the confusion the moving herd had left behind. If this was their plan, he thought with grim satisfaction, it was doomed to failure. He found the place where the fresh tracks turned off from the old trail. They continued to go west and he continued to follow but at night, he had not caught up with the thieves.

He stopped, let his tired horse graze for an hour, then continued due west. Two hours later he heard far ahead the neigh of a horse. Then he spotted the light of a small fire burning under a big cottonwood. He slipped from the saddle, tied his horse, took the carbine out of the boot. The fire worried him. Horse thieves should not be so careless. As he silently approached the fire, he wondered if the men he was seeking had started it. He didn't know, had no way of knowing. Around him in the darkness he could hear horses feeding and as he slipped closer, he saw two men squatting beside the blaze. He recognized them as the two strangers who had eaten supper in camp the night the herd had been stampeded. Lawson and Bruckles.

He walked quietly into the circle of the firelight. They came to their feet like startled cats and their hands moved toward the guns holstered at their belts.

"I wouldn't," he said.

They saw the rifle he was holding at his hip. The hammer of the saddle gun was back and his fingers was on the trigger. They lifted their hands without being told.

"What is this?" Lawson said. He was the taller of the two, with evasive darting eyes. He had not shaved in weeks. Nor had Bruckles.

"Unbuckle your guns and drop them."

"What—" Lawson began.

"I said to unbuckle your guns and drop them," he said. There was that quality of tone in his voice that sent their hands quickly toward the buckles of their gun belts. The guns thudded on the ground.

Saddles with ropes attached lay beside the fire. "Lawson, take a rope and tie your partner's hands behind his back," he said. "You, Bruckles, turn around so I can see if he's doing a good job of tying you."

LAWSON didn't like to do it. He looked a long time at Chuck Bledsoe and at the saddle gun Chuck was holding. Then he picked up the rope from the nearest saddle. When he had finished, Chuck made him turn around. He set the carbine down, took his six-gun in his left hand, tied Lawson's hands behind his back.

"If this is a hold-up—" Lawson began.

Shifting his six-gun to his right hand, he told them to turn around.

Behind him in the darkness he heard the soft click of the hammer of a gun.

The sound told him why these two horse thieves had dared to sit beside an open fire when there was a chance that someone might follow them. There was a third man with them. Out there in the darkness this third fan had just cocked a gun.

He threw himself flat on the ground.

Exploding powder leaped at him from the darkness. A bullet gnawed the air over him. Aiming at the flash, he flipped the hammer of his gun, flipped it again, and again. A second shot roared from the darkness, the flame lancing straight up. Out there a man yelled with pain.

"Run!" he heard Bruckles shout.

The gunman in the darkness was no longer a potential source of danger, he knew, but Lawson and Bruckles were running. He let them go. They were tied to two ends of forty feet of rope.

He heard the crash as they hit the ground, heard the mumbled curses from the darkness. He picked up his saddle gun and walked toward the sound.

Tied together, they had tried to go different sides of the same tree and had almost tore their arms out of their sockets as the rope jerked them to a halt. He herded them back to the fire, went to see about the third man in the darkness. He looked at the man, who was dead, then came quietly back to the fire.

"Did somebody hire you to steal our horses or was it your own idea?" he said.

"We bought these horses," Lawson answered. "We got a bill of sale from

Jorgenson. I got it right there in my saddle-bag." Lawson tried to point toward the second saddle, compromised on nodding his head when he again realized his hands were tied.

He moved to the saddle. Lawson, thinking he was looking for the bill of sale, told him exactly where to find it. He made no effort to open the saddle-bag. He took the rope from the horn, moved back to the fire, set the carbine against the cottonwood. The two men watched him as he straightened out the rope.

"What are you goin' to do?" Lawson said.

He did not answer. Fifteen feet up on the cottonwood was a limb as big as his body. The rope rattled on the smooth bark as he tossed it over the limb.

The two men watched him as he drew the loop to a six-inch noose.

"Hey!" Lawson said. He was swallowing frequently and there was sweat on the bearded face.

Holding the noose, he walked toward Lawson. The man tried to back away. Chuck pulled his six-gun.

"I'll shoot a leg out from under you if you don't stand still," he said.

Visible in the firelight, sweat stood in yellow drops on the man's forehead. "But—but—"

He slipped the noose around the man's neck, drew it snug, went back to the other end of the rope.

"I asked you a question," he said.

It was Bruckles who screamed, "Tell him what he wants to know before he hangs both of us."

Both tried to talk then, at the same time. He listened to what they had to say.

"When we get back to camp, you're goin' to put this in writing," Chuck said. "But first you're goin' to help me take this horse herd back where it belongs. Then you're going north with us to the Arkansas."

BEYOND the Arkansas lay Dodge City, with its railhead and its shipping pens and its buyers of beef for the eastern markets.

Chuck Bledsoe and Sim Giles reached the river at noon on the 14th day of June. Following a couple of miles behind them was the trail herd. The old man was openly jubilant as they rode the last mile to the river.

"We'll bring 'em up and bed 'em down on this side tonight and tomorrow morning we'll start settin' 'em over. Winters' contract calls for him to be on the north bank of this crossing to accept delivery. He'll drive down from Dodge in the morning. We'll have the whole herd over by noon."

The old man was as excited as a boy.

"Your uncle will be there, too," he continued. "He told me he was goin' east and take the train back to Dodge. Will he be tickled when he learns how you brought the herd through in spite of everything that could be done to stop you!" The old man's face darkened then. "That good-for-nuthin' Winters hirin' them three coyotes to buy off Jorgenson, and when that failed, to steal our horse herd. There's the Arkansas, Chuck!" Giles pointed north, to sunlight glinting on water. "There she is."

They rode up to the bank of the stream. Beside him, he was aware that Sim Giles was talking like a man in the middle of a bad dream. The old man's voice was a disjointed mutter of whispered profanity. Chuck Bledsoe sat silently in his saddle.

Below him, a great torrent of muddy water, carrying huge logs and up-rooted trees, was sweeping past. The only sign of life he saw was a flat-bottomed scow draw up against the bank, a river ferry, with the ferryboatman squatting on the bank.

"Oh, shucks!" he heard old Sim Giles whisper. "She's full from bank to bank. She's in flood and there ain't no way on earth of gettin' a herd of cattle across until she runs down. Chuck, we may have to lay over here on the south bank for a week."

The ferryboatman, scenting passengers for his craft, came up to them. "Howdy gents. Set you across the river, gents? You bringin' up a herd, gents? Too bad. If you'd a-been here a couple of days ago, you could have waded 'em across."

They were still sitting on the bank of the river, staring disconsolately at the yellow flood swirling past below, when the trail crew brought the herd up behind them. Chuck Bledsoe rode off by himself then, and the silent crew, without a word from him, let the cattle graze along the bank of the river they could not even cross.

Early the next morning, long before sun-up, Chuck Bledsoe rose and went down to the bank of the river. In his heart he cherished the secret hope that somehow the swollen stream had run down during the night. He saw the river, if anything, had risen another six inches.

As if to compensate for the almost constant rain, the sun, on the fifteenth of June, rose in a cloudless sky. Along the south bank of the river, the cattle began grazing on the thick grass.

A little before noon, Chuck saw a buggy drive up to the crossing on the other bank. Even at this distance there was no mistaking the stiff, erect form and the white hat of his uncle. The other man in the buggy, he guessed, was Winters. The buyer of the herd had brought the owner down to the crossing.

Colonel Bledsoe got out of the buggy and walked down to the river and looked at his cattle grazing on the opposite bank. He stood there, looking. Some of the stiff erectness went out of his back.

Chuck Bledsoe yelled across the river, where the ferryboat man had taken his clumsy craft, then went to the wagon and got the contract from the metal box. Lawson and Bruckles, working as cook's helpers, watched him in apprehensive silence. He motioned to Sim Giles to join him.

"What are you goin' to do, Chuck?" Giles asked.

"Goin' over the river," he answered.

The ferryman set him across. Colonel Bledsoe shook hands with his nephew and wanted to know where Jorgenson was and started to ask other questions. Then, taking a second look at his nephew's face, he suddenly stopped asking questions.

Winters sat in his buggy and looked down at him. The buyer was a big man, wearing city clothes. A gold watch chain looped across an expansive vest front.

"No, young man," he said decisively. "My contract calls for delivery on the north bank of the river. I can't accept delivery anywhere else."

"You didn't bring a crew," Chuck said. "It looks as if you weren't expecting to accept delivery anywhere."

"I—" Winters closed his mouth. "That makes no difference," he said. "I'm prepared to wait here until dark. If you can't deliver the cattle on the north bank by that time, I shall consider the contract void. And if you attempt to collect, I shall take it to court."

The buyer looked at the swollen river. His eyes glinted as if the sight was very pleasant.

COLONEL BLEDSOE made a regretful noise in his throat. Chuck drew Sim Giles to one side and gave his first order since he had become boss of the trail crew.

"Go back over the river and get those confessions," he said. "And get Lawson and Bruckles. Bring them over here. Bring three of our men with you. And bring three ropes."

Sim Giles went without a word across the river. When he returned to the north bank, the ferry was crowded by the men he brought with him. Winters was waiting in his buggy. His face changed when they came up to him. "Don't you try to use force on me, young man. I won't stand for it."

Chuck ignored him. He spoke to Lawson and to Bruckles. "Is this the man who hired you?" he said.

"I never saw these two men before," Winters said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He clucked to his horse but Sim Giles had already moved to the head of the animal.

"Red, give me those ropes," Chuck said. Red Chambers silently passed the hemp strands to him. "Is this the man?" he asked again.

Lawson and Bruckles looked at the ropes and at Chuck Bledsoe and at Winters, "That's him," they said, in the same voice.

He looked up at the man in the buggy. "If our drive hadn't been hindered, the herd would have been across the river two days ago, before the river rose. I have here the sworn confessions of these two men, stating that you hired them to buy off our trail boss. He quit, thinking that the crew would not be able to make delivery on time with me as boss. When that failed, these two men, and one other who didn't live long enough to get here, stole our horse herd."

"I don't know a thing about it." Winters waved his hands. His face had grown pale and his breath was coming hard.

"In this country, we have one treat-

ment for horse thieves," Chuck went on. "We hang them. These men stole our horses. You hired them to steal them. That makes you as guilty as they are. You have five minutes to make up your mind whether you want to accept delivery of that herd on the south bank of the river or whether you want to be treated as a horse thief."

He shook out the ropes in his hand into three separate coils.

Winters was pawing the air with his hands. "I can't do it. It'll cost me money."

Chuck Bledsoe hung two coils of rope on his left arm. With his hands, he began shortening the loop on the third coil.

"I don't have any crew," Winters screamed.

"I'll lend you my crew," Chuck said. "I'll lend you my crew until the Colonel can cash your draft and you can get some men of your own."

He shook out the loop so that it became a noose.

Winter's eyes bugged out as he looked at the noose. "I'll accept delivery on the south bank," he whispered. "I'll make out my draft."

Chuck handed the three ropes back to Red Chambers, turned and walked away. It was all over, he knew, but the signing of the draft and collecting the money. And the Colonel, now that he knew what had happened, could take care of that part of the transaction.

Back on the other side of the river, he saw the rest of his men. They had come up to the river bank. They were waving their hats at him and yelling. Their cheers drifted across the water to him. He listened with pounding heart. Then it began on this side of the river, began with Sim Giles and Red Chambers. The sound echoed across the water. His men were cheering him, he thought, and grinned with delight.

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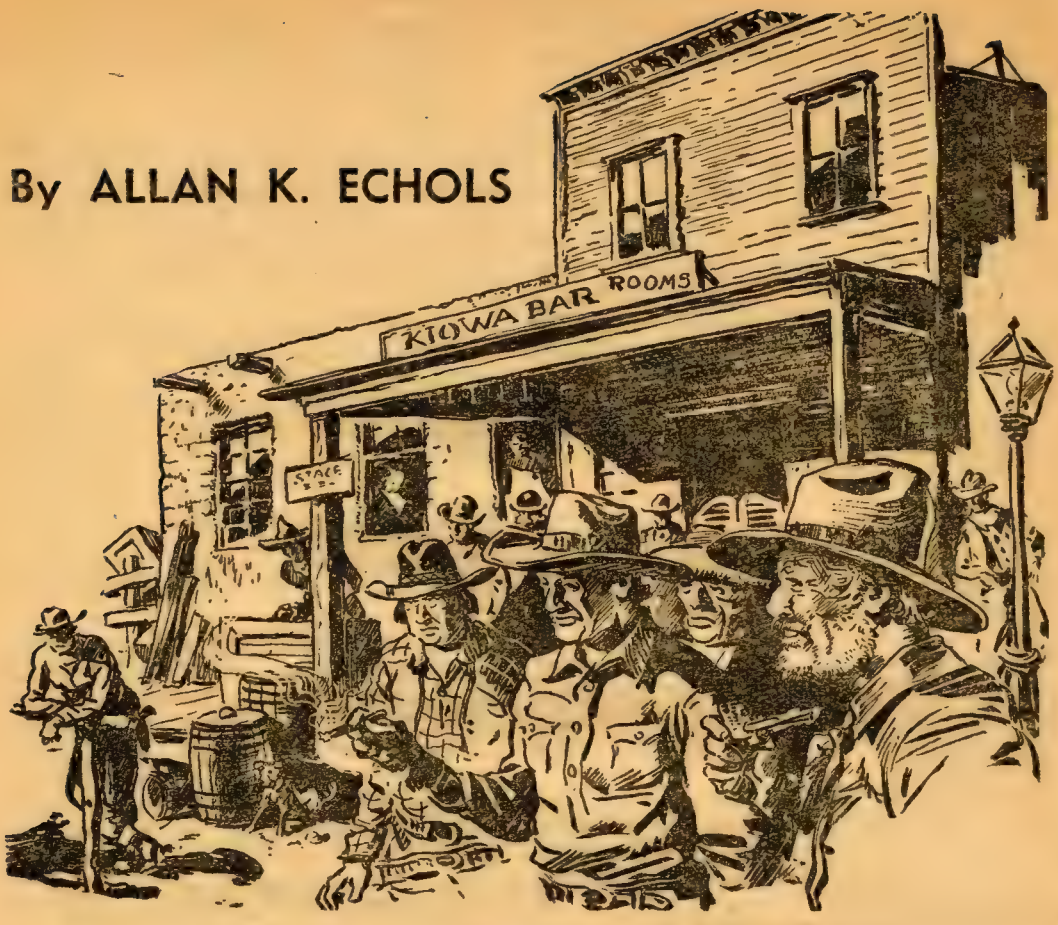
By ALLAN K. ECHOLS



CHAPTER I

End of the Journey

RICK TOWER was having a beer at the Kiowa Bar when a couple of other customers went over to the window and looked at the Indian Agent's shack across the street.

"Fight," one of them said. "Them pilgrims."

The other man shook his head. "They ain't wastin' time buckin' up ag'in Langston, are they? Green as gourds."

Rick Tower put his empty glass on the bar and walked to the batwing doors. He pushed them open with one of his wide shoulders and went out. The smile that usually marked his face faded as he saw the commotion on the porch of the frame building across the street. He had guided these pilgrims up into the Territory from Texas, and his obligation to them was finished. Now Mary Wingate's uncle was being beaten up by a pair of town ruffians while a third man held him by the neck. He forgot that he had no further interest in the strangers. He churned up the dust getting across the street.

He landed on the Indian Agent's porch with one step from the street. Then he reached out and caught one of the attackers by the scruff of the neck. The other one was bareheaded, and Rick's fingers locked in his tangled hair.

He cracked their heads together as though they were coconuts. He pounded one man's face with the other's head until blood spurted from his nose and his legs went limp under him. Rick turned him loose and the man sank to the floor.

Then he tightened his grip in the

other man's hair. He turned the man's face toward him and crashed his massive fist squarely into the man's nose. Blood spurted as though from the neck of a stuck hog. The man's eyes became blurred and his knees buckled under him. He fell on his companion.

Mary's uncle Dell Wingate, freed from the attack of the pair, had spun in the grasp of the man holding him, and now he smashed his fist into the man's jaw, and when the man's hands came up instinctively, he crashed another blow to his stomach with power enough to break his ribs. The man groaned and sank down against the wall, gasping for breath and clutching his middle

The fight was over.

BREATHING heavily, Rick stood rubbing his fist and looked at Wingate. The tall man's face was red with anger, and he was breathing heavily through his nose.

"Worst attempt at robbery I ever saw," he said. "The whole town's nothing but a bunch of thieves. I never came seven hundred miles to settle in a place like this."

"What's the trouble?"

"First place, the Indian Agent says we can't either buy or lease Indian land without a certificate from the Kiowa Civic Association."

"I lived here some years ago, and I never heard of anything like that before."

"Something new, the man says. Got to be recommended as responsible citizens. The gent with your fistprint on his nose represents the association, and he tells me that a settler can get one of them certificates for a matter of fifty dollars or so. Then after a man has got that, he's got to hire a man named Tebo Langston, who is a farm agent, to handle his transaction with the Indian Agent. The broker's fee is a dollar an acre, same as the lease price."

"Nobody ever had to buy a recommendation to get government land," Rick said. "I've got an uncle around here who's a land dealer. Used to live here with him when I was just a kid. We'll get him to straighten it out if he's still around. He's a square shooter."

"I told the Indian Agent he wasn't doing right. He just said that if I didn't like the arrangement, to go and see this Tebo Langston. Seems like this is a one-man town, and Langston is the man.

"If that's right, then this Langston is a crook," Rick said.

"That's what I told 'em, and that's what started the fight. Seems that red-headed hombre that you smashed his face in is Bud Langston, Tebo's son. He's the president of this Civic Committee. His dad is mayor. The other hombre you fought works for Langston."

"It looks like you gents picked a pretty tough nut to crack when you decided to settle here," Rick said. "Fine looking land about, but if it's one man's town you won't have a look in. Think you'll stick it out, or try on further north?"

"I'd have to talk to the rest of the folks," Dell Wingate said. "What's it like north of here?"

"It gets into prairie; not any too much water and still less timber. Cattle country."

"I'm for staying and fighting it out," Wingate said, "but it's up to the crowd. We came together and we've got to stick together. Are you going to be around?"

Rick hesitated before answering, wondering if Mary had told him anything.

"I can't say for sure," he answered. "But I was figuring on heading back for Texas."

He got away from Wingate as quickly as he could, puzzled because the girl hadn't spoken to her uncle. He made his way back to the camp, half a mile across Dog Creek, where the twenty or thirty settlers' wagons had spread out over a high place overlooking the wild raw town.

He searched for the girl, learned that she had gone off into the woods, and set out looking for her. He found her standing on a point overlooking the creek and the broad rolling land back of the settlement, now green with the new life of spring.

Mary Wingate was small, but straight as a willow shoot, and now her eyes were gleaming with emotion. She turned to Rick, and the smile she gave him did something to him that went down deep inside him. He had never known a girl who could affect him like this before.

He tried to take her in his arms, but she drew away from him, though not with anger. It was as though something inside her had her in its grasp, something he did not understand.

He smiled at her. "The journey's over,

honey. There's the settlement, and my job's done. We'll cross the creek with 'em tomorrow and get married, then light a shuck back to Fort Worth."

The girl smoothed back her honey-colored hair on her small head, and her voice was low and charged with an antagonism which filled Rick with surprise.

"Rick," she said, "it won't do. We wouldn't be happy together."

He looked at her, a look of pain in the eyes that had been happy. And then he put his arm around her and his old self-confident, teasing smile came back.

"Don't joke with me like that, honey. It hurts."

SHE slid out of his arms. "I'm not joking, Rick. I don't want to go anywhere. I want to stay right here and have a home."

"But honey, I've got a good job waiting at the stockyards in Fort Worth."

"Fort Worth! And after a month, maybe San Angelo, or New Mexico, or no telling where! Wherever the wind blows you. Oh, Rick!"

Her eyes were on a grapevine cutting that she had dug out of the woods. She twirled it in her hand nervously, looking at the tiny reddish serrated leaves bordered in green.

"Don't you see what I mean? No roots in the ground. No home. You just want to roll before the wind like a tumbleweed. People can't live that way."

Impatience crossed his face. "I see. You want to tie me down for life in one place. Neither of us ever had a home, but I tell you, I don't want one, either. I've seen too many people tied down to misery. It's freedom that counts, freedom to come and go as you please."

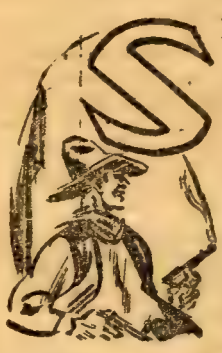
"Freedom to drift!" There was pain in her voice. "Freedom to starve, to die of loneliness. Don't I know? Haven't I learned anything from being tossed from one uncle to another ever since my parents died?"

"Mary!" Blood suffused his temples, and his hands were big, tanned fists. "What are you trying to tell me? That you were just flirting with me? That I was just somebody to amuse you on the trip up from Texas? Well, I hope you were entertained."

The girl's eyes took on a look of hurt. She started to place a hand on his arm, but he turned and was pushing through the woods toward the wagons. She stood as though stunned for a long moment, then sat down on a stump. The grapevine seedlings and honeysuckle roots she had gathered dropped on the mossy ground as she buried her head in her arms. She wept without sound.

CHAPTER II

Trouble with the Marshal



SLOWLY Rick walked back through the trees toward the wagons standing on an open point above the ford of the creek. He was puzzled and angry with the girl, angry for having allowed himself to get so interested in her on the trek up from Texas.

"So that's why she hadn't told her uncle about us!" he muttered.

His face twisted into a bitter smile as he recalled having lain on his blankets at night under one of the freight wagons picturing himself, a drifting freighter, guide, horsebreaker or gunfighter, whatever came up, settling down in one place. This had been a narrow escape, he told himself, and he reached camp intending to pack up and get out while he still had his freedom. There was always something new to see over the hills.

A dozen or more men in overalls were squatting around a wheel of one of the wagons, whittling and talking when Rick came up. They were a hard-working lot from Texas, and from the already worn-out lands of Mississippi and Alabama. Their faces were marked and bodies shaped from their long fight against worn-out ground, and they looked off of the high place to the green and fertile valley below with the home-hungry eyes of men who wanted to get a plow into the rich black loam, to take it in their hands and sniff its spicy fragrance.

Dell Wingate was going over the details of his experience at the land office.

"There's a man named Langston that runs a real estate and farm loan business, that seems to own the town. You just can't turn around without having to pay him off in one way or another.

It'll cost us a hundred or two hundred dollars apiece to even get located here. What else it'll cost us later, there ain't no tellin'."

"I just ain't got that much cash over and above what it'll take to lease my land," Jed Benscomb said.

"Me neither." "I sure ain't." A half dozen of the farmers indicated they were in the same plight.

Rick Tower squatted among them, waiting. They owed him a hundred dollars cash for guiding them up from Texas. Dell Wingate had this money, and Rick wanted to get it and get started back. He didn't want to come face to face with Mary again.

He was angry with her, but as much as he wanted to get away, there was something that made him hope she would come and tell him that she would go with him. She was different from the kind of girls he had danced with in the honky-tonks on the long trails and in the wild towns that had known him, and she affected him in a way he couldn't understand. Most girls made him wary, but he found himself wanting to protect her.

However, his own pride wouldn't let him go back and find her and try to persuade her to go with him. He wanted to get his money and get away from these pilgrims.

Wingate said, "There's one thing for sure. We ain't going to be able to settle here and live in peace as long as this Langston man is in control of things. He's got his claws in everything, and he's going to keep them there till somebody breaks him loose."

"Then why don't you break him loose?" Rick asked. "If anybody tried to stand me up for the privilege of living where I chose, he'd have to kill me to do it."

Wingate studied the youth who had already saved him from a merciless beating. He was a thoughtful man, slow to make a move until he was certain of his position.

"We don't want to act till we know we're right," he said, "and even then it would be plumb rash not to consider the odds against us. Langston would naturally have gunhands siding him. We're not fighting men; we're farmers."

"You know how to use a rifle when a man's imposing on you, don't you?"

"Yes. But would you go into that town yourself and try to whip an organized bunch like his?"

"I would if I wanted to settle here bad enough."

Mary answered him. She had come up out of the trees behind him, and he hadn't seen her. There was something cold, almost bitter in her voice.

"But he doesn't want to settle anywhere. We'd better not count on him."

RICK turned and looked at her, but her eyes were on her uncle. There was a tightness about her mouth, but otherwise she gave no sign of the emotion that was strong within her.

Rick glanced around at the group of men, and they were avoiding looking at him. He knew why. Their days had been close together back on the trail, and their troubles had been common to all of them. Now, within sight of their goal, but facing complete ruin, Mary was telling them that he was walking out on them when they needed him most. Anger surged in him, and it was her accusation that forced the answer from him.

"That's not quite right," he said shortly. "I hired out to you folks to see you settled at Kiowa. It's another half-mile to Kiowa. My job is not done till I've got you settled there."

The moment the words were out of his mouth he realized that he had spoken through his pride and anger, and that he was contracting for trouble. But it couldn't be helped now. He had to prove that the girl's insinuations were wrong.

He got up off the stump and said: "If you gents want to wait here, I'll go on over into town and try to find out what's behind this. I'll look up an uncle of mine and see what he says."

He went to the freight wagon where he kept his warbag and got out his pistol and belt and strapped it on, then headed for town.

He reached the main street of Kiowa while there was still a bit of light, and stopped off at the Owl Cafe to eat. While he was eating, an old man came in and looked for a place in the half filled dining room. Rick saw the man and recognition came to him. Old Ben Chilson had been a friend of his uncle. He called to Chilson, and the old man, his face showing no sign of knowing Rick, came over and sat down at his table.

Rick introduced himself. "I'm John

Tower's nephew," he said. "You probably don't remember me, but I used to see you out at my uncle's ranch. Used to live with him when I was a kid."

The old man threw a suspicious look around the room, then turned back to Rick. He seemed uncomfortable, even furtive, and this puzzled Rick.

"I wouldn't say that so loud," Chilson cautioned. "Finish your dinner, then go on up to my saddle shop. We can talk there."

Still more mystified, Rick asked in a lower tone, "I wanted to get in touch with John."

"You might, if you keep on talking," the old man said dryly. "He's as dead as you'll be if you keep tellin' it around who you are."

"You knew me, then?"

"Sure. And so will others."

Rick finished his ham and eggs, left a dollar on the table and went out of the restaurant, a smouldering anger rising in him. He still didn't know what the mystery of this town was, but every move he had made since he got here had got him more deeply involved in it. And now he had learned his uncle was dead, and that he could expect the same treatment if he were known. It looked as though he wouldn't be getting back to that job in Fort Worth very soon.

He was passing a group lounging in front of the Kiowa Bar when one of the bunch stepped out and confronted him. It was one of the two men he had fought earlier in the afternoon. The man was short and heavy-set, and now he wore a deputy marshal's badge and a gun hung in a low tied holster.

"You, mister," he said. "I've been lookin' for you. You're under arrest for assault and battery."

"On who?"

"On me."

"As far as I know, you were doing the battering. I just stopped you."

"Anyhow, I'm taking you to jail. That is, unless you want to just give me the fine now. It'll be fifty dollars."

Rick felt his gorge rising. The man's face was already swollen and turned blue from the blow in the nose that Rick had given him, and his eyes were puffed up and turning black, the whites of his eyeballs bloodshot.

"And so you're after me to collect, huh? Well, I don't think I'm going to get the habit of paying off for every move I make in this town. What's your name, anyway?"

"Buck Ransome, and you're going to have plenty of time in jail to remember it," the other answered. "Just lift your hands while I take over that hardware you're sportin'." The man lifted his own gun out of its holster.

Rick's hand shot out and caught the man by the wrist, jerking the man's weapon upward. His other hand caught the barrel and he wrenched the Colt from the man's grasp.

Ransome cursed, doubled his fist and threw a blow at Rick. Rick dodged it, letting it pass over his shoulder. Then he laid the gun barrel across Ransome's face with a slashing blow. He whipped the weapon back and forth, right and left with full swings that caught the man on one side of the face and then on the other. At last the yelling deputy dropped into a crouch and shielded his face with both his arms.

Then Rick ejected the shells from the gun and threw them out into the dusty road, and tossed the gun up onto the roof of the saloon.

"You might just as well get used to me being around," he said. "And when I've got anything to fight about I'll fight —here or anywhere else. Now, keep out of my way while I 'm around."

"You won't be around long," Buck Ransome promised him.

"I might," Rick answered.

CHAPTER III

In the Calaboose

WITH challenging eyes, Rick looked at the crowd, but none of the loungers seemed ready to take up where the deputy left off. He walked on down the street toward Chilson's harness shop.

It was after dark when old Chilson let himself in. "Come in into the back room before I make a light," he said.

Chilson lighted a lamp in the small room back of the shop, which contained a cot and a monkey stove and a few pots and pans, and a deer rifle hanging on a

pair of cowhorns over the door. He sat on the bed and motioned Rick to the only chair.

"You sure are getting yourself in a jam in a hurry, ain't you?" the old man said, stuffing tobacco into a blackened corncob pipe. "Looks like you're just honing for trouble."

"Trouble seems to be honing for me," Rick answered wryly. "What happened to John?"

"The coroner said it was an accident —but it wasn't. He was murdered."

"How?"

"You see, about four years ago a horse throwed your uncle and broke his hip, and he was in a wheel chair after that. Couldn't tend to his real estate affairs. Just stayed around the ranch, bossin' it from his chair. He hired a man by the name of Langston to run his business in town, and this Langston is greedy and smart.

"Well, Old John used to get his wheel chair pushed up to the top of that cliff alongside the ranchouse, and sit in the sun and look off over the countryside. One day about a year ago Langston and some men who went to see him on business found him and the wheel chair all piled up under the cliff. John was dead and the wheel chair was a wreck. They said it had accidentally rolled over the cliff and John was killed in the fall. It looked like an accident, all right."

"How do you know it wasn't?"

"Remember Hosea Pinetree, that old Indian that lived on the hill back of John's place? Well, Hosea and his wife was coming through the woods to clean house for John, and they saw it. Buck Ransome pushed John Tower over that Cliff and killed him."

"Did they report it?"

"No. They was afraid to. Ransome is the law, himself, and he must have found out or suspected that they saw the murder, because that night somebody came and burned down Hosea's shack. The old woman was sleeping, and she burned to death. Hosea happened to be out running his troutlines on the creek, and they didn't get him then. But they shot at him a couple of times since, and he's been hiding in the hills after that. I'm the only one he trusts."

Rick was beginning to see the vicious cruelty of the man back of this trouble, and the rage that had been burning in him was reaching a white heat.

"What does this add up to?" he asked. "What's in Langston's mind?"

"Power, son. He's money mad and power mad. Shortly after John's death, Langston came up with a will that claimed to leave everything to him in case John died. There'd been two years of drought, and most everybody in the valley owed John money. He'd have carried the boys along till they had a good year. But Langston, having got control, foreclosed on practically everything John had paper on, and those he didn't bankrupt, he bought by holding their mortgages over their heads. He's got his own men running everything, and bleeding the country dry."

"This Civic Association?"

"Just an extortion scheme. You've got to pay him tribute even to settle here, and then keep on paying him if you want to stay."

Rick thought a minute. "John didn't have any living kin, except me."

The old man looked at him queerly. "That's why I tried to shut you up there in the restaurant. You'd be his heir—in case that will was a forgery."

"You think it might be a forgery?"

"Well, John learned before he died that Langston was crooked, but he was helpless to do anything about it. I don't believe he'd have willed Langston anything. If that will wasn't a forgery, then it'd be the first honest thing Langston ever touched."

"Looks like the people around would buck over the traces."

"Nobody actually knows how Langston got his hands on things except me and Hosea Pinetree, who told me. And I'm too old to fight him, and his organization all alone. And Hosea knows that a lone Indian wouldn't have a chance."

RICK got up onto his feet. "Where do you suppose I could find Hosea? I'll protect him."

The old man got up off the end of the bed. "You'd better watch your step, son. Langston is strong, and he is greedy and merciless. That son of his is a coward and a bully, but he'd shoot you in a minute if he could do it safely. And that Buck Ransome, he's rattlesnake poison. He's a killer, and he ain't afraid. He's Langston's right hand man, and you done got yourself on his list."

"I want to see Pinetree."

"Remember that limestone cave by

the three oaks at the head of Clear Creek? Go to them trees and yell like a hoot owl. Better tell him I sent you, and call out your name, else you'll never lay eyes on him."

"Thanks. And now about this will? Where is this Langston's office?"

"In the back of the town hall building. It belongs to you by rights."

Rick said, "Thanks a lot, Chilson. I might not win, but Langston is going to know that he's been in a fight."

Chilson let him out the back door. "Better not pass any lighted places. Wish I was a few years younger!"

"Much obliged. You keep out of it."

Rick went around the corner of the harness shop, his mind filled with bitterness at the man who had killed his uncle. Old John had been a square shooter, and it was not his fault that Rick had got the wanderlust and had hit the long trails.

Come to think of it, now that John was gone, those days when he was a kid and the old man was teaching him to ride and rope and shoot were really the only happy days he had ever known. But, being an orphan, he hadn't wanted to be dependent on anybody else, and he had hit the trail.

It occurred to him with a sudden shock that maybe Mary had been right after all. He wished he hadn't been so positive with her about wanting to keep his freedom. With old John's ranch, and her, things would be different.

"Dreamin'," he accused himself. "You done fixed your clock with her. And besides, there's a whole lot between you and John's ranch."

As he turned the corner around the harness shop, a gun came up and bored into his back. The voice with the gun was the growling bass of Buck Ransome.

"All right, smart hombre, I'm finishing what I started. Just hold them hands out wide while I pull your fangs. Cover him, men, and if he bats his eyes, salivate him. He ain't so tough."

Two figures emerged from the shadows on either side of him, dark men with their hats pulled down over their faces, but the guns in their hands shown wickedly in the faint light. Rick spread his hands.

Ransome unbuckled Rick's belt, rebuckled it and swung it over his own shoulder. "Now, my lad, you're going to learn that when I tell a man he's going to jail, he's going to jail. Just head down the walk now, and if you want to run, do it. I won't stop you—much!"

Rick cursed his own carelessness, but he had too much sense to buck three guns with his bare hands. He walked on before the men and turned into the pine boxing-and-batten building which housed a pair of big steel-barred jail cells with massive bolts and padlocks on the doors.

The two men backing Ransome moved apart, seated themselves on window sills, and kept him covered. Ransome hung Rick's gunbelt on a peg back of a pine desk, then took off his own gunbelt and hung it on another. Then he turned to Rick.

"Friend," he said. "This is for meddling in things that ain't any of your business. And when I get through working you over for that, I'm going to give you more of the same thing for resisting arrest. And when I get through with that, if you're still alive, I'll think up something to give you another one for."

Ransome's bloodshot eyes were narrowed, mean, as he cocked his fist and drove a blow at Rick's jaw. Rick dodged it and shot a fist at the man's face, but one of the two men tripped him and the blow went wild. Ransome slipped in under Rick's guard and sank two blows to his chin which staggered him. He ducked backward to keep from falling.

One of the guards lifted a foot, planted it in his back and slammed him in Ransome's direction. Ransome landed a fist in his face which sent him spinning. He landed on the floor on his back, and before he could roll over, Ransome was on top of him, his two fists beating a steady rhythm in his face.

BY NOW Ransome was vicious, a cold-blooded, feelingless killer, and having Rick down helpless, he beat him until at last Rick's reeling senses deserted him and he lay still.

Only then did Ransome get up, rubbing his bruised knuckles as Rick lay motionless on the pine floor.

"I wish he'd stayed conscious longer," Ransome said. "I need the exercise."

One of the men laughed. "He'll be lucky if he gets up at all."

"If he's got any sense, he won't," Ransome returned. "Because I'm going to work him over every time I feel like it, and I got a hunch that'll be pretty often.

Drag him in that cell and throw the key away."

One of the men caught him by the foot and dragged him into the filthy cell and left him lying on the floor. He was regaining consciousness now, but he was careful not to betray the fact. He heard Ransome's growling voice giving orders.

"Hank, you stay here and watch this hombre. He's worth too much to me to risk them pilgrims breakin' in and turnin' him loose. I just heard something that the boss is goin' to fork over some real dinero to learn."

"What?" Hank asked. "Did you hear that old harnessmaker spoutin' off?"

"Did he?" Ransome bellowed. "He was diggin' his own grave with his vocal chords. And I also know where that Injun's hid out. With them two out of the way, don't nobody know nothing about nothing."

"Except this nosey pilgrim," Hank said.

"Nosey pilgrim?" Ransome repeated. "You don't know who this hombre is yet?"

"I ain't heard his name called."

"He's just the boy that by rights owns everything Langston's got his hands on. John Tower's only living kin. Don't you reckon Langston'll pay off on that? 'Course, we may have to persuade the young man to sign a few important documents for Langston before he heads for the Happy Hunting Grounds, but that can be arranged. Stick around till I go get the old man."

"Sure," Hank agreed. "This is one hog-killing I'm gonna be in on."

CHAPTER IV

Strand of Wire

LYING on the dirty floor of the jail cell Rick felt his strength returning to him slowly. His face was bloody and swelled, and his body sore from kicks he had received.

"This," he told himself, "is what comes of you getting hot under the collar because a girl said you was letting them pilgrims down."

And the next minute he knew he was wrong. It might have started out that way, but now it amounted to more than that. It was his personal fight. This organized bunch of thieves had murdered his uncle and stolen the birthright that belonged to him. And thanks to Ransome having overhead Chilson telling him these things, they knew who he was, and they would have to dispose of him before they would be safe.

He knew with a desperate certainty that his life was not worth a piece of wormy dog meat as matters now stood, and this knowledge gave him the urge to get his strength back, and his thinking faculties, so that he could do something about it.

It occurred to him now he was not thinking so much about the loss he had suffered at the hands of this Langston, whom he had never seen, but that if he couldn't put a spoke in Langston's wheel, then the pilgrims and Mary would be at the man's mercy. It was all right for men to want homes, and the peace needed to live in them. They had a right to them.

As he lay on the floor of the jail, it came to him that he wanted a home, too, that he wanted to again stand on the high place beside the old ranch house and look across the rolling green hills and the flat bright pastures. With the old ranch, and with Mary beside him.

Yes, that was it; he wanted to be like those grapevines Mary was holding; he wanted roots deep in the ground, so that the winds and the rains, and the storms of men's greed could not toss him around and leave him lying on the filthy floor of a jail cell.

His anger at the brutality and injustice of these men gave him strength, and he looked around. The cells sat lengthways of the building, with the office desk at the far end, and he could not see the man called Hank who sat at the desk playing solitaire. Hank could not see him.

The only sound in the building was the flick of Hank's cards as he shuffled and dealt them. Rick studied the cell and knew that he could not break out of it. He searched the narrow confines of the cell, trying to figure some way of escaping. But there was nothing in the cell except a wooden bench made of one by twelves, and an old wornout broom in one corner. He focused his attention on

the broom.

After a long time during which some of his strength returned, he slid his body along the floor and got the broom down beside him without making enough noise to disturb Hank. Then still lying as he had been tossed, he set to work unraveling the wire which held the broom straws to the handle.

Half an hour later he had a small noose made of the yard-long piece of steel wire. He had recovered much of his strength now, but when he got to his feet, he acted as though he could hardly support himself, even by clutching at the bars.

He called to the man guarding the jail. "I want a drink of water. I'm about to die."

The unseen Hank guffawed. "Where you're going before this night's over, you'll sure enough want a drink of water. They tell me that place is almost as hot and dry as West Texas."

"You mean you wouldn't even give a prisoner a drink?"

"Mister, you got yourself into this. If you want a drink, run over to the saloon and get it." The man chuckled at his own crude joke.

"All right," Rick answered. "You money-hungry thieves, how much do you charge your prisoners for a drink of water?"

"Twenty dollars a cup," the man laughed.

Rick said, "That's just how much I've got. If I've got to pay it, bring me the water."

The man's chair scraped and he walked back to the cell, and looked at Rick suspiciously. He saw Rick supporting the weight of his battered body by clinging to the bars.

"Let me see that dinero before I bring you any water."

Rick got one hand into the pocket of his levis and brought out a twenty-dollar gold piece.

Surprise on his face, the man said, "You wasn't kiddin'. Give it here."

"Not till you bring the water."

THE man shrugged, and went back and filled a tin cup, and returned and stuck it within reach of the cell.

"Toss that money out."

"You put the water in first. You've got a gun, and you can get the money if I don't give it to you."

"And that would be a pleasure," the man said.

He pushed the cup through the bars. "Here, take it."

Rick's hand reached for the cup. But it did not grab the cup. Instead, it grabbed the man's wrist and jerked it inward with such force that the man's body slammed up against the outside of the cell.

Rick's other hand went through the bars with the steel wire loop, and he tossed it over the man's head and jerked. The fine wire cut into the man's throat and choked him until his eyes bulged. He could not pull back against it without straining against the wire and making it cut deeper into his own throat.

Rick pulled the man tight against the bars, stuck a hand out between them and got the man's gun. He turned it on the man and snapped an order.

"Unlock this cell quick, or I'll cut your head clear off with this wire."

A gurgling sound came from the man's throat as he tried and failed to talk. His face began turning blue.

The man's free hand went into his pocket and came out with the key, and he unlocked the padlock and threw the door open with lightning speed.

Rick loosened the wire about the man's neck, and the man gulped for air. He stood panting like a person who had run twenty miles behind a galloping horse.

Rick said, "You hombres play rough. But I know something about that game myself."

He hit the man over the head with the barrel of the man's own pistol. The man's knees went as limp as water, and he sank to the floor. Rick caught him by the collar and threw him into the cell and locked the door behind him. Then he went out to the office and got his pistol belt off the wall and buckled it around him. He stuck Hank's pistol in his waist, slid out through the door and the night swallowed him up.

He headed for the town hall which he had noticed earlier in the day, skirting the partly lighted street and taking to the alleyway behind the row of false-front buildings. Chilson had told him that Langston's office was in the rear of the hall.

When he reached the building he stopped a moment and surveyed it. There was a dim yellow light coming

from a rear window. He took more care now, going forward silently and with gun in hand. He found the door by feeling for it, and found it locked. There was nothing for it except to go in through the closed window.

He found a stone with his booted foot, and picked it up. At the window, he crashed the stone suddenly through the glass, shattering it. Then he stepped in, pushing the curtain aside with his left hand, covering the room with his gun.

The red headed young Bud Langston was seated at a desk going through a stack of papers. He was a big, gawky youth with white skin and flaming red hair, affecting range dude clothes. His face showed marks of his encounter with Rick earlier in the afternoon, and he had a white piece of tape on one cheek. He looked up, his pale blue eyes widening at the sight of the intruder whose face was a bloody mask.

Rick, while covering him, looked over the youth's shoulder and saw the big open safe behind him. It looked as though for once he was going to get some kind of a break of luck.

"What do you want?" Bud Langston demanded. "Get out of here." He seemed not to recognize the battered features of the man who had whipped him.

Rick saw that Chilson had sized the youth up right—a bully and a coward. He doubted if the youth could stand up to a direct attack, for there was an inside weakness showing now in his face. Rick decided to play on that.

"I'l tell you who I am and what I want. My name is Tower, and I'm here to get what your thieving dad and you have stolen from me. I'm either getting it right now, or I'm doing some killing —I don't care which. Right now, I came for that will your dad forged."

He watched this shot closely, for it was merely a conjecture. He saw the youth's face flush, saw him lick his dry lips as he floundered for an answer. The truth of Rick's accusation was written all over the man's features.

FINALLY young Langston managed to stammer, "You're loco. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Save your breath," Rick snapped as he crossed the room. He went around the desk, still keeping his gun trained on Langston, and approached the safe.

He watched the youth's eyes, as a man might watch the eyes of an opposing poker player, and he read his answer right. Bud Langston was not poker player enough to conceal the fact that the will was in the safe.

Rick kept the man covered with his gun while he jerked folded papers out of the pigeon holes in the safe, and spread them out on the desk sufficiently to examine them. They were mostly canceled mortgages, live mortages and real estate papers. Many of them bore his uncle's signature on them.

He continued to watch the youth's eyes, seeing now that he could judge when he was getting closer by the perspiration popping out on Langston's forehead, and by the nervous clutching of his hands as he sat back in his swivel chair.

He had emptied the safe except for the little cubby hole ordinarily used for cash and more valuable papers. It had its own small iron door, and it was locked.

"Give me your keys," Rick snapped.

"I haven't got them," the youth said, and Rick could see that he was lying.

Rick stepped over to him and hit him across the head with his gun barrel. "You snakes have bumped into somebody that can play as rough as you can," he snarled. "Now give me those keys or the next time I'll crack your skull and take them. I'd just as soon do it that way."

The sweating young man reached into his pants pocket and brought out a ring of keys.

"That lock ain't working right," he said. "You couldn't open that door, but there ain't nothing you want in it, even if you did open it."

"Then you open it," Rick snapped. "I'll decide whether I want anything out of it."

Bud Langston lumbered up to his feet and went to the safe.

Inserting the key in the small door, his body hid his hands from Rick. Langston got the door open and reached into the small compartment.

"All right, look," he said, turning around.

Young Langston had turned with the surprising speed of desperation, and a small handgun was in his fist. His face tightened into a snarl as he pulled the trigger.

Rick was a moment slow in suspecting

a trick, and he dodged almost too late.

The small bullet passed through the fleshy part of his side and burned like a branding iron.

These were treacherous, deadly men he was doing business with, and he cursed himself for not dealing with them thus. He snapped the hammer of his own weapon.

And he shot to kill!

His heavy forty-five slug drilled through the snarling youth's vitals while he was cocking his little gun the second time, and it threw his aim off. His bullet nicked Rick's leg.

But it was a dead hand which had fired that second small bullet. Bud Langston's arms went limp and the small gun dropped to the floor. Then his own lumbering body melted down on top of it, and he did not move.

Rick heard a rattling of the front door, and he took a pair of quick steps back to the safe. He grabbed up the papers in the last cubby-hole and shoved them into his pockets, then ducked out the back window and disappeared into the darkness.

He knew now that when Langston learned of his son's death, the whole valley would be a seething cauldron of hate directed at him. If they ever got their hands on him again he would either be shot or hanged as a murderer.

He made his devious way toward the harness maker's shop, keeping to the deeper patches of darkness.

Now he would have to prove his case or die. And he didn't even know whether he had found the will which he suspected—but did not know—was forged.

CHAPTER V

Singing Lead

CAREFULLY Rick kept himself concealed in the darkness and finally reached the side door of Chilson's shop. When he started to knock, he found the door swinging open. He called softly several times, and got no answer.

Fearful that Langston's men had beat him there, he stepped inside and struck a match.

The room was a shambles. The chair and table were overturned, and pots and pans scattered on the floor. And there was a blood smear among the damp coffee grounds on the linoleum.

Rick stood while the match burned down in his fingers, and a hot anger flooded him. He blamed himself, for it was Chilson's efforts to help him which had sealed his own doom.

He should not have gone to the town hall to get those papers first, but should have come first to warn Chilson that Ransome had overheard his conversation.

He turned and made a quick survey outside the harness shop, but could pick up no sign of Chilson or his body. He was convinced that it would be fruitless to search further in the dark.

And now that the Indian's hiding place was known to the enemy, he was in danger of being killed. Rick hastened across the creek to the camp, got his horse and rode out to the mountains. It took him two hours to find the old Indian, convince him that he'd be safer with the settlers, and to bring him back to the settlers' camp.

He found Dell Wingate and the other men sitting around a campfire in a consultation. When he came up and stood by the fire with a gun on his thigh, another in his belt, and his face bloody and swollen, they all stopped talking and looked at him.

Wingate said, "It looks like you've been up against Langston's bunch. Did you learn anything?"

"Plenty—if I can prove it," Rick said.

He took the papers out of his pocket and riffled through them. "Here's what I was looking for," he said as he opened a legal paper reading, "Last Will and Testament of John Tower."

He glanced at the signature, then compared it with the same signature on a couple of the canceled notes which he had collected with the other paper. He handed them all to Wingate.

"Gents," he said, "Here's what I learned in Kiowa." Then he told them of the things that Chilson had told him, of his trouble with Ransome, and about killing Langston's son.

"That signature is a forgery, if I'm any judge," he said. "What'd you say, Wingate?"

Wingate studied the will and passed

the papers on to the man next to him.

"I ain't an expert, but they don't look to me like the same man wrote 'em."

"That's what I think," Rick said. "And if we're right, it means Langston has stolen what rightfully belongs to me. And it's my stuff, money and property that he's using to hold his power with. Ransome is Langston's tool, and Pinetree, here, is our witness that he killed my uncle. He's our ace in the hole. See that nothing happens to him."

"Gents," Wingate said, "Langston's got no more right to be running Kiowa than Rick here."

"Not as much, I'd say," one of the others opined.

"That's all I wanted to know," Rick said. "If you men think I'm right, I'll go in and settle with Mr. Langston right now. If he don't like me taking my stuff back, then let him go over to Fort Smith and sue me. If I can get it back, I don't think there'll be any more trouble in you locating in Kiowa."

"We're with you," Wingate said, and the other settlers expressed the same sentiments.

Rick took the papers back from the men and handed them to Wingate again.

"Will you give these to Mary to hold for me?" he asked. "And I'd like everybody here to hear me say this. If anything should happen to me, I want Mary to have the ranch. She's always wanted a home of her own."

"Some of us will go with you," Wingate said.

"It's not your fight. This is personal, between me and Langston."

"But you're doing it as much for us as for yourself. I wouldn't want to stand by and see another man fight for my right to live in peace. If I can't help fight for it, I don't reckon I'd want it."

"Nothin' doin'," Rick said, "I contracted to bring you to Kiowa. It's my job." He turned and headed back across the creek.

BEHIND him, Wingate said to the others, "For one, I ain't going to let that boy face that whole murderous bunch by himself. He hasn't got fear enough to know when he's outnumbered."

"He's doin' this more for us than he admits," one of the others opined. "I don't think Mary would like us not giving him a hand."

Old Toad Morris, who was a bachelor, observed, "I thought they wasn't interested in each other so much any more."

Wingate laughed. "That's what they might think, but usually a quarrel means a boy and girl is more interested than ever, but just won't admit it. I ain't worryin' about that."

* * * * *

Rick Tower turned into the street in Kiowa and walked part of its length. Men gathered under store awnings where there were lighted windows looked up at him, and their jaws dropped and eyes widened as they spotted him for the wanted man. An atmosphere of tenseness hung over the town, like that in a prison on the eve of an execution.

He saw a group of horses at the rail in front of the town hall, and others joining them, while their owners disappeared into the hall. He read this sign to mean a posse was gathering. He headed toward the hall, turned through a vacant lot to approach it from the rear.

He bumped into a man in the darkness, and quickly jerked his gun, just as he felt a rifle pressed into his middle. "Who the heck are you?" came a voice he recognized.

"It's Rick! That you, Chilson?"

"Yeah. I mighty near shot you, kid. What're you doing here? The whole town's after you for killing young Langston."

"Looking for Langston. I thought they got you."

"So did they. Ransome and somebody broke in on me. I fought 'em, but I didn't have a chance. They reckoned they'd killed me, I guess, because when I woke up they'd drug me down to that ravine and left me. I come to with my head in the water. Reckon it revived me. Anyhow, I went back and got my deer rifle, and I'm going to pay Ransome off for that, and for John."

"No you're not. I owe them the most. You stay here."

"I ain't even fixing to stay here. You can have 'em, but I'm covering you."

They went to the back of the town hall, went in through the window Rick had knocked out earlier. Rick went on through the office and suddenly emerged

into the town meeting room. He backed against the wall and looked it over.

There was a crowd of townspeople on folding chairs facing a long pine table at the front, behind which sat a massive man with heavy red features and white hair. This would be Langston, for he emanated power and confidence in his own ability to command.

Ransome sat at the end of the table, his face showing the marks of his encounters with Rick. And behind Ransome, but separated from the run of the townsmen, were half a dozen men that Rick spotted instantly as Langston's hired hands, men whose guns brought them extra pay.

Langston was in the middle of telling the people that his son had been shot by a robber in the course of defending his office.

A stir went through the room as Rick stood there, and then absolute silence settled over them, a silence so tense that the room seemed to have stopped breathing.

"Langston," Rick said, addressing the big man, "My name is Tower. I'm the man you're talking about. You and I have got some business to settle."

Langston nodded wordlessly. His face was immobile, unreadable. Rick saw a cool, confident man, sure of his own ruthless ability. Langston was a thinker, a planner.

Rick walked over to him easily. "Are you ready to settle with me?"

Langston looked at him calmly.

"For what? For the murder of my son?"

"For the murder of my uncle."

"You'd have to look elsewhere, if you think your uncle was murdered."

"But not far," Rick answered. "Right here!"

With unexpected speed, he turned and caught Ransome by the collar. He jerked the surprised marshal to his feet. Ransome growled and reached for his gun, but Rick halted that action by driving his fist into the pit of the man's stomach with such force that Ransome doubled up with a groan. Before Ransome could recover, Rick whipped out his own pistol and slashed the man across the face with it, leaving a trail of blood. He whipped the gun across Ransome's face half a dozen times, bouncing the man's head from left to right and drawing blood every time.

LANGSTON did not move, other than to rub his fat hand across his chin. He spoke softly.

"That's pretty dirty fighting, mister."

Rick saw the play. There were townsmen here who might not be Langston men, but they would be influenced by Langston's pointing out to them that Rick was being brutal. It would convince them that whatever story Langston might have told them about his son's death might be right.

"It's no dirtier than a man deserves who would murder a cripple—and for hire! Ransome, tell these men how you pushed John Tower off the cliff."

Ransome looked appealingly at Langston, but Langston was rubbing his chin and gave no response. Rick pistol-whipped the man over the head some more, and Ransome groaned. Rick raked the gun across his jaw with a loud crack.

"Talk quick, or I'll beat you to death with this gun. Tell us why you killed John Tower!"

Langston said loud enough for the men in the room to understand. "You're a pretty dirty killer yourself, young man. Everybody can see that. I wonder if you'd be so brave if you didn't have an advantage over your victim." He looked significantly at his audience.

Rick sensed the meaning of this move. Langston was cleverly proving to the townsmen that Rick was nothing but a killer who would beat a man to death when he got the advantage of him. He glanced at the men, noted a stir among them, and knew that he was skating on mighty thin ice right then.

He had no choice in the matter, if he were to win over the townspeople. He loosened his grip on Ransome's collar.

"Toss your gun on the table," he ordered.

Ransome's hand went down to his gun. He brought the weapon up, careful to keep his finger away from the trigger. He tossed it on the pine table. Rick threw his own down beside it.

"Now," he said, "tell them why you killed John Tower, or I'll beat you to death with my two fists."

Langston spoke up. "Take charge of your prisoner, Ransome."

With a gesture which was hidden from the townspeople, he flicked one of the two guns across the table, to within reach of Ransome. Ransome's hand shot

out toward it!

Tricked, Rick saw that he could not beat the man to the weapon. His own sense of fair play had become his undoing.

Just as Ransome's hand caught the gun handle, a voice barked a command.

"Don't touch it, Ransome, or I'll blow your head off!" It was Chilson, standing just inside the door with his rifle at his shoulder. "And watch them tricky hombres, Rick."

Rick had no further reason for offering Ransome fair play. He heard the scuffling among the people on the folding chairs, and he knew instinctively that they had seen the treachery, and that their sympathies had swung to him. As for Langston's own men, they had apparently held their hands waiting for a sign from their boss. And that sign hadn't come yet.

But with Rick now unarmed, Ransome had as good a chance as he needed, and he came into Rick with his fists doubled, prepared to beat him to a pulp. He ran square into an oaken fist which mashed his nose flat against his face. Blood spurted, his knees went loose under him.

Rick caught him by the collar, and pounded his face unmercifully.

"Speak up," he demanded. "I gave you your chance."

Ransome gulped and was silent. Rick's fist went into the man's middle with a thud that made the man pale, then followed it with half a dozen resounding smacks across his already injured face.

"Talk!"

Ransome was taking an awful beating, and his strength was ebbing. He glanced at Langston, and Langston remained stony silent. Ransome tightened his lips. Rick smashed his fist into the tight mouth. This last blow brought the blood streaming—and it broke Ransome's obstinacy.

"All right," he gulped. "I can't take any more. Sure, I pushed him off. Now let up on me, will you?"

"Keep talking!" Another slap smashed across the man's face.

"I told you. I done it. What more do you want?"

"Why? Who told you to?"

"You know, as well as I do."

"Say it. Say the name of the man who ordered John Tower killed!"

"I won't!"

RICK'S fist crushed the pulp of the man's nose, and the man went green and sank to the floor. Rick jerked him to his wobbly feet. "Say the man's name."

"You're the same as murdering me. You know. It was—" He turned to Langston.

Langston's hand came out of his jacket pocket, and he coldly shot Ransome between the eyes. The man died and slipped out of Rick's grasp.

Langston's shot was a signal to his men, and the half-dozen gunhands slid out of their chairs and were scattering, even as Rick whirled toward his gun on the table.

But Langston was fast, and his little weapon couldn't miss at such short distance. The impact of the small caliber bullet caught Rick in the shoulder and he and the table went over together. The gun slid down the inclined tabletop, and Rick crawled toward where it had fallen on the floor.

Langston had shot again, but his bullet had only gouged splinters out of the floor and flung them into Rick's face. Rick got his hand on his gun and rolled over onto his back, and in the confusion he saw that Langston had strode toward him and was standing practically over him. Langston was taking careful aim at the stationary target at his feet.

Rick lifted his weapon's barrel just a little and flipped the hammer. It seemed terribly slow, and he heard Langston's weapon pop in the echo of the roar of his own gun. He felt a jolt pass through him—and then there was a blackness surrounding him.

He lay as one dead.

* * * * *

When life began seeping slowly back into him he found himself in a room, in a bed, and between clean sheets. There was a water pitcher on a dresser, and it was filled with wild flowers.

He could hear voices, and he tried to turn his head. It hurt him a lot, and made him dizzy, but he managed it, and he saw that there was a face floating around in the haze in the room.

It was Mary's face. It kept floating until it was near his, and he could see the anxiety in it, and what he thought

were the remnants of tears. She placed her hand on the bandage on his forehead.

He looked at her, and her loveliness was like strong medicine, bringing his strength back to him. He caught her hand.

"Where are we?" he asked. "I never saw this room before."

"Don't talk," she warned him. "The doctor said I could be the first to see you when you came to, but he said if you talked I'd have to go away. This is his home."

"Then you talk. What happened?"

"I'll tell you what Uncle Dell said. When they got there, the marshal was dead and you'd killed Langston. Your friend Chilson had Langston's gunmen lined up with their faces to the wall. Uncle Dell and the others helped him disarm them, and the townspeople chased them out of town. They brought you here, and the doctor patched you up. You've got four bullet holes in you."

"Maybe that'll be enough to let all the meanness drain out of me. Look, Mary, do you still want that home with the grapevines, and all?"

"I never wanted anything else—except you," she said. "Uncle Dell told me about the ranch."

"He didn't tell you everything. There are wild grapes there, and flowers on the hill."

"Rick, stop talking, or I'll have to go away."

"Kiss me, and I will stop."

"No, not now."

"Then I'll keep talking until you do. As I was saying—"

He did not have to keep talking.

"Keep Your Hands Off Me, Rio Kid! If Yuh Try to Arrest Me, I'll Gun You Down!"

THE Rio Kid lunged forward, lithe as a panther, and his fist stabbed into Nutcracker Lynch's eyes and nose. Before Lynch could take aim and fire, the Kid wrenched the gun from his hands and delivered a knockout blow.

"I warned you about pullin' a gun," said the Rio Kid. "We'll tie you up and give you a trial in the morning."

"I tell you it was a fair fight," protested Lynch. "Shelby Keith drew first, and I had to kill him. . . ."

"We'll see about that," said the Rio Kid. "And the rest of you—I contracted to take yuh through to Santa Fe, and I aim to do so, but yuh got to stand behind me!"

The assembled men nodded assent—but Bob Pryor knew he had the toughest job of his life on his hands! For the announcement of a gold rush had caused dissension among the members of the wagon train—and bitter feuds added to the troubles already caused by Indians and the elements.

Major Frank North, Colonel Cyrus K. Holliday, Clay Allison and other famous Western characters fight side by side with the Rio Kid in SANTA FE TRAIL, by Tom Curry—the complete book-length Bob Pryor novel featured next issue.

It's a smashing saga of the pioneer West, packed with gunsmoke and glory from start to finish—an exciting and inspiring adventure that bristles with action!

Look forward to SANTA FE TRAIL—it's a real reading treat that will bring you the far-famed Rio Kid at his quick-trigger best!

Rifles and revolvers drove the Navajos into confusion

DARK COMES THE NIGHT

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

Fort Defiance buzzed with rumors about Sergeant-major Riggs, but when the Navajos attacked—he was ready!

TO SERGEANT-MAJOR Joe Riggs, Fort Defiance in Arizona territory looked exactly like what it was—the end of the frontier. Walls of stone and mud surrounded a bare oblong. This was a long descent from the shining offices of the headquarters of the First Cavalry in Albuquerque. Yet he held no regrets when he rode through the sally port to find the parade ground what it was supposed to be, an exercise ground for the company's mounts.

Fort Defiance had been established here in the Navajo Indian country in 1851, once abandoned and then with the inception of the Navajo Wars in 1863, re-established. The stables faced the quarters across the parade ground beyond the flag pole. There Riggs dismounted, tossing his bridle reins to a lazy looking New Mexico volunteer.

"Where's the major's office?" Riggs asked.

The stable man bestirred himself and pointed across the way. Riggs strode across to a door and entered an office. Major Moorman, a middle-aged citizen of Sante Fe sat in the heat with tunic open, a wan smile on his face. He took Riggs' papers and inclined his head. The interview was over.

So Sergeant-major Riggs descended upon the haphazard post at Fort Defiance. Within a matter of days he knew the whispers about him. He knew about the rumors that he had been shanghaied here by General Carleton's chief of staff, a regular army man, Colonel Egglesby. The trouble was the colonel's beautiful eighteen year old daughter, Normine. The colonel was standing for no nonsense, such as his daughter fancying herself in love with a mere sergeant-major, even if he was a regular instead of a New Mexico volunteer.

There was another story about Riggs, too—one the troopers considered carefully. He might have come to them from a headquarters command, but slightly prior to that, Riggs with a handful of men and two white scouts, had held off and then escaped from three hundred Mescalero Apaches in the south at Two Springs on the Rudiosa. Desperate battles with Indians was nothing new to Riggs, it was said.

In the small command at Fort Defiance was one Sergeant Kaeuper, who alleged to better knowledge of the new sergeant-major.

"Watch your nose, boys," he advised. "This Riggs is bad medicine for gold brick soldiers."

RIGGS only acknowledged the bull sergeant with a nod of the head when he found him in the non-coms barracks room. Nor did he take it upon himself to harry the slackness of the volunteers into something more resembling fighting cavalry. On the contrary he appeared to be entirely unaware of their slackness, their despondency not to engage in too heavy work.

Their lack of military bearing, the lazy spirit of efficiency, certainly of the lowest level possible, had been the despair of the junior officers. If they looked for the new sergeant-major to whip them into some representation of military men they were for a few weeks in for disappointment. None in the army were more lack luster, easy going and as independent as the New Mexico Volunteer.

Three weeks after Riggs' arrival Blas Lucero, a Mexican trader, appeared at the fort with his wagons. He brought things not carried in the meager stock at the sutler's store. Such as, for instance, the colorless yet potent corn whisky that had to be disposed of in the dead of night. With Lucero also came the infrequent post.

Riggs found a square letter for himself in the first sergeant's office. A letter addressed in a precise feminine hand that sent his blood rocketing. He shoved it inside his tunic, heading for quarters. But several non-coms were there so he took himself to the west side into the stables. The mounts, except for the necessary guards, were grazed during the day in the cienega at Red Rock.

Alone, Riggs opened the missive, reading it slowly, and then again. Normine had written:

Dear Joe,

Father is sending me to St. Louis with the next escort going to the States. I am to spend three years in Miss Downes school for young ladies. He does agree that if, at the end of that time, I am still in love with you (of course I will be!) he will consent to our marriage. I am sorry this is the best I can do. I love you.

Normine.

His first action was to crumple the letter in bitterness. Three years! They would grow apart in that length of time. Impossible. Then he straightened the letter out and put it away in his tunic.

At Fort Defiance Riggs changed from that day. He dressed two troopers down with blistering sarcasm for not taking proper care of their mounts, and rode down to Red Rock every day to inspect the guard watching the horses. But it was on Saturday he really blew up.

Inspection of the guard had always been a perfunctory affair with the major. Troops here on the battle line were not expected to be exactly all polished buttons. The major gave them a hurried once over on Saturday morning. The captain told Riggs to take over and dismiss the men.

Riggs' snappy salute should have been warning. Moving closer to the troops, he sat his horse in silence looking them over, his sparsely freckled and not unhandsome face working into a scowl. All the time he kept an eye on the officers' quarters until he saw the major and the captain disappear. Next, he considered the bystanders, for the major's wife was at the fort and the sutler had a family. But within a few minutes the coast was clear.

The troopers chafed over delay so they could go back to their games, or

loafing until Monday morning. Riggs lifted his voice hardly at all, but his words owned a carrying quality that went to the ears of the most distant man.

His blistering tirade actually seemed to scorch them. He pointed out men on mounts that hadn't been combed down in a week. He went over their equipment piece by piece, talking fast and with deliberate insult. Next he attacked their personal cleanliness, their unbuttoned tunics. In a few minutes he had half of the command fighting mad. The others were red with shame because they fancied themselves at least halfway ready for weekly inspection. Yet not according to Sergeant-major Riggs.

"I see no buttons that have even been cleaned, let alone shined!" he declared positively. "None of you have blacked your boots. Your bridles are a disgrace to any self-respecting man. Don't you know that every time the army enlists a man, the government buys him ten gallons of harness daubing so he can spend his entire enlistment polishing up things in his spare time?

"For this disgraceful, downright deliberate failure to present yourself in proper shape for inspection this morning every single man is confined to the fort until further instructions. No weekend passes to town will be given any of you!"

ANGRILY Riggs dismounted, turning his horse over to the nearest man. He nodded his head at Sgt. Kaeuper.

"Get them out of sight!"

Wheeling around he strode rapidly for the officer of the day's room. Behind his back a voice rose derisively:

"Where does he think he is—standing parade back at Ft. Leavenworth?"

The troopers were too stunned and mad to catch on until this diversion. It was only then they began to understand Riggs' cutting irony. For their asserted short-comings, which even the angriest volunteer couldn't deny, he assigned no real punishment. His order was merely a token of such. No weekend passes were ever given at Ft. Defiance. For the simple reason that even the nearest Indian or Mexican jacal was more than a hundred miles away.

First came a titter and then deep laughs. It rose, drowning out Sgt. Kaeuper's order to dismiss. Riggs hid a grin as he stepped through the door into the O. D.'s room, only to come up short. The major was there along with all the rest of the officers of the command. Through the opened door they had heard his scathing reprimand. The major's eyes twinkled.

"It's about time you turned your hand to making something of that sloppy bunch," he observed. "Be very certain you keep at it, sergeant!"

On Monday at colors the troopers presented an entirely different picture. Their horses, equipment and themselves were bright with cleanliness. Most of them concealed amused grins. If the sergeant-major wanted to play games with them, they would oblige as long as it relieved tedious monotony.

Riggs rode with the Indian scout, Hosteen Tso, that day to the *cienega* at Red Rock. They sat their saddles above the meadows within the shade of Red Rock for awhile.

"This I like to show you." Hosteen Tso waved a hand to the west and south. "Through the passes you see there into this low land the Navajos have come before. They will do so again."

Studying the scout thoughtfully, Riggs recalled that despite the mass of tribesmen now held in captivity at Bosque Redondo, not all of them had been taken by the campaign of the winter of 1863-64. The hardiest of the renegades fled west, and were now coming back to raid the New Mexico frontier. But even in force would they dare attack Fort Defiance?

Hosteen Tso was a Navajo himself. Riggs suspected he would play the fence between his immediate kin and the cavalry. It wasn't improbable that much of his prediction came directly from association with the renegades themselves.

"Do you think they'll come soon?" Riggs asked him.

For a moment the scout stared at the ground. "Not," he said slowly, "until the nights come dark again."

Major Moorman thought it entirely preposterous the Navajos would ever attack Ft. Defiance, or come near it on their raids through the frontier. The junior officers considered his opinion sufficient. Then the very next day one of the three scouts hurried in to report a band of raiders camped only twenty miles north on Whisky Creek.

The major dispatched Riggs with Lieutenant Kinsey and forty men to pursue. That large number was solely for the purpose of giving the troopers training in the field. The patrol found the cold ashes of the camp on Whisky Creek, took the trail and chased the renegades for ten full days.

It was a field hardened bunch of troopers who returned to the fort. Meantime the district chief, Chachos Nez, was reported in the southwest on Wide Ruins Wash. For Lt. Kinsey and Riggs it was to take the field again. Such close approach of wanted Indians couldn't be permitted. The orders this time were to hasten pursuit and capture the Navajo raiders if possible.

For two weeks the troopers played hide-and-seek with the wily Navajos. Hosteen Tso scouted day and night, and did get them up in time for a few shots. But it was mostly shoot and ride again. Near the end of the third week of this tiring maneuver, Lt. Kinsey decided to pull out. They were down to eating parched corn, having run out of supplies. The patrol turned northward, recrossing upper Wide Ruins Wash, and collided head-on with Chachos Nez's band who thought they were leaving the troopers far behind.

THE skirmish lasted a mere matter of ten minutes or so, yet it was one of comparative disaster. Casualties, Lt. Kinsey killed by the first exchange and three men wounded. The Navajo losses were not known for they carried their dead off the field.

The glum, haggard troopers returned to the fort. Tiredly they dismounted before the stables. For some reason the guards over the sallyport walked a military beat. There were signs of prolonged activity all over the place. Riggs dusted some of the alkali from his clothing and turned for the major's office to report. He hardly got started before meeting a strangely ambitious Sgt. Kaeuper.

"Riggs, get your men ready for immediate inspection. Major's orders!"

Riggs broke to an amazed halt, his mouth opening on clean, white teeth. The worn-out trooper behind swung around to listen in sheer astonishment.

"What's wrong," Riggs wanted to know. "Is a Congressional delegation making an annual investigation?"

Sgt. Kaeuper had started away. Now he slowed.

"The fort is going to be opened up, with more troops coming in. Because of recent Navajo depredations we're going to become a base of operations with a colonel in command. He's already arrived, and he's the one doing the inspecting. Big brass direct from headquarters!"

"No-o!" Riggs gasped, and felt imposed upon. "Who? Anybody I know?"

Sgt. Kaeuper was going away definitely. He flung over his shoulder:

"Egglesby. Better look alive. He's trying to make brigadier all in one hitch!"

Riggs' young face wore a bewildered look when he returned to his men. Lt. Kinsey's body lay on the ground, well wrapped.

"Care for your mounts, boys," Riggs drawled. "Then come to stall ten. Egglesby!" he muttered to himself. "Is this moving day for me again?"

The men entered stall ten shortly where Riggs waited. When all were there he turned into the outside corner, kicked some grass hay aside and removed a demijohn from a hole in the ground.

"I made a side deal with Lucero when he was here," he observed. "I reckon this is one of those times when we can use snake blood!"

The troopers greeted the jug with extreme delight. Riggs took the first swallow, and passed it around.

After a bit one worried man inquired, "Maybe this is a time when we ought to spruce up a bit. Them colonels are pretty important, ain't they?"

"We come in tired out and weary from three weeks in the field, and break our neck with the last ounce of our strength for—Colonel Egglesby? The devil with him!"

In the silence that followed from the outside came Sgt. Kaeuper's voice, "Attention!" The trooper with the jug dropped it over into the manger hoping it was out of sight. There was time to do little more.

Colonel Egglesby was rotund, with snapped back shoulders of the veteran cavalryman. He came a step inside the small width of the stall, his black eyes passing over men and the very filthy stable in one swift glance. Behind him appeared Major Moorman looking de-

cidedly uncomfortable.

Riggs got hardly a glance from the colonel. His face was very straight, yet long training couldn't prevent the colonel's eyes from showing his immediate disapproval of these men. None had a tunic buttoned. They were unshaven, dirty, boots worn gray. Their yellow stripes didn't show plain against the faded blue of their trousers. Three of them wore dirty bandages of a most unsanitary nature. This was the worst looking bunch of troopers the colonel had seen in many a long day.

His mouth opened twice, closing with a click of teeth. His face paled and he could be seen to tremble. Yet for some reason he did not explode, or turn on Riggs. Clucking disapproval in his throat he backed out of the odorous stable, moving on with the inspection party.

"Get a load of that," Riggs drawled. "The colonel didn't like our looks at all. Very much disapproving, I'd say. Expecting us to be ready for inspection on a minute's notice and us bringing the lieutenant back in a sack!" The bitterness of his words still echoed on the air when the colonel's head popped into the doorway.

WITH a cold light of his eyes, he surveyed Riggs from head to foot, and back again. There existed no doubt but what he heard. Yet for the second time the colonel turned away without a word of reprimand.

They gave him plenty of time to depart before a man spoke.

"Sarge, I reckon just lifting your stripes is the luckiest thing that you can expect now!"

But no order came through to bust Riggs, much to his own surprise. Near sundown the command paraded and buried Lt. Kinsey on the small knoll to the north of the fort. None but troopers and their officers attended. Riggs kept away from the major's office.

Then after dark he strolled to the sutler's store. He entered, not at first observing anyone else except the gaunt Texan who operated the place. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light he wheeled on hearing a gasp. Normine stood at the counter facing him, her eyes bright with subdued eagerness. Exclaiming her name, he went over fast, and her arms fastened to his neck.

"I thought you'd be half way to the States by now," he said.

"I refused to go," she answered. "Joe, when Father got this new command from General Carleton I insisted on coming. I want to tell you—"

Whatever it was remained unsaid. Colonel Egglesby strode in through the open door, paused staring at them. Riggs wheeled away from her, saluted and went out fast.

Mrs. Egglesby was at Ft. Defiance also. Riggs saw her up before the officers' quarters sitting under the cool of the narrow low porch with the major's wife.

Before that night was over he realized something important. Few stars showed in the void of the night sky, and the moonlight lasted less than two hours. When there was no moon and no stars the nights would be completely dark. The next day outside the fort he came upon Hosteen Tso.

"Yes, this is near the time when the nights come dark," the scout agreed. "It won't be long now. They come for certain, *nahtahni-yazzie.*"

Riggs grinned. That *nahtahni-yazzie* meant "little captain," a term the Indian scouts used for sergeants. At the same time he felt convinced Hosteen Tso had more than a guess the Navajos would really attack the fort. He spent several days riding with various ones of the three scouts in the region around the fort, on the pine timber covered plateau to the west, and through the broken valleys, defiles and great eroded masses of landmarks to the east and south. The pinnacle of Red Rock was a marker on which Hosteen Tso assured him from time immemorial Navajo raiders had guided their course across the frontier.

Riggs' endless scouting began to bear fruit. Hosteen Tso pointed out stealthy sign of skulkers spying on the fort. Soon they became so numerous, finding evidence of prowlers near at hand wasn't difficult at all. Riggs went to Major Moorman.

"Non-sense!" the major declared. "There aren't enough Navajos on this side of the frontier to take the fort. They know it."

"How about letting me increase the horse guard, sir?"

"*Hmm,* I'll talk to the Colonel."

Major Moorman went into the next

room, leaving the door open. Riggs could hear them talking.

"Your sergeant-major is having wild fancies," the colonel replied dryly. "However, increase the horse guards. It will give the men something to occupy their time!"

When that was done the next day Hosteen Tso remarked to Riggs that was better if they brought the horses inside the fort walls earlier in the afternoons. Beyond that he wouldn't explain. Two days later he observed the wrinkled, stolid faces of the scouts more placid than ever. Yet he could get nothing out of them.

That night at nine o'clock he strolled into the saddle-room where the scouts slept. They were not there, and their blankets were gone. Riggs made for the sergeant of the guard. What did he know about their absence?

"Two of them left the fort near sundown," he replied. "Hosteen Tso ought to be in, though."

But he wasn't. Riggs paused on the parade ground facing the open sally-port. Indecision mounted within him. He could reason only that the Navajo scouts fled to escape what they firmly believed would be certain entrance of the attackers. They were near in such force they believed defeat certain for the troopers. Riggs could imagine the carnage if those raiders gained the walls. Besides, and here he shuddered, women were in the fort. Normine! He felt his scalp pricking with certainty of this night.

THE Navajo attack would come with all the surprise they could contrive. Walking fast he reached the ladder to the arch over the sally-port. The two guards halted their pacing. Riggs stared from the wall into the deep stygian gloom surrounding the small valley. Nothing down there he could see, yet his alarm mounted.

"Close the gates," he said to the guards. "Stay behind something. Keep on the alert because we're surely in for something."

"What's up, Sarge?" one asked as he started descending.

"Close the gates and lock them. Stay behind the tower walls."

By the time he reached the hard packed red ground the gates were shut. That meant no entrance there. What next? He met Sgt. Kaeuper coming from the orderly room, headed for his bunk.

"Kaeuper, man the walls," Riggs told him.

"Huh? You got orders from the O.D.?"

That would be necessary, but Riggs told him go ahead and send men to the walls, on the mass of roofs surrounding the outside edge of the fort. The stir was immediate. The officer of the day, the captain, came through the lighted door of the office before Riggs got there.

"What's going on, sergeant?" he demanded.

"I've closed the gates over the sally-port, pending your approval, sir," Riggs answered. "And to the walls." Colonel Egglesby rushing through the door stopped him.

"What's the meaning of all the noise on the roofs?" he demanded bitingly. "Men tramping all over the top of the living quarters. Have it stopped at once!"

"Yes, sir," began the captain.

"Sir," Riggs' voice lifted compellingly. "I have good cause to believe Navajo renegades are about to attack." He plunged into reasons why.

He spoke to the captain, but when he finished that officer hesitated just long enough for the Colonel to break in.

"Ridiculous in the extreme! The Navajos do not have an effective fighting force left. They wouldn't risk attacking this fort!"

Here it was again, the army man unthinkingly disparaging a very dangerous Indian. Riggs began his salute before departure when the cry echoed on the air, a wavering, rising sound that chilled the blood, somewhere in the blackness beyond the sally-port.

They turned in astonishment at the weird cry. Nearer something else happened with tragic suddenness. On the wall a rifle clattered to a flat mud roof. Out of the darkness the falling body of a sally-port guard took shape as it came into the lighter darkness inside the fort. The body twisted over in the air on its downward plunge to the ground. Riggs broke into a short run, the other men coming along behind.

They came up to stand looking down. Only Riggs sank to his knees. The guard was dead, a Navajo arrow sticking out

of his back. This man hadn't obeyed orders to stay behind the wall. Because of his failure a bowman with the eyes of an owl spotted his body long enough to cut loose. A bow being used so as not to give away the shooter's position below. He might get still another guard.

"Man the walls!" the captain ordered hoarsely. "Sergeant, get the men up there as quickly as possible."

"Precautionary measures," the Colonel put in. "Good enough, but I've no doubt the attacking force consists solely of this one skulking murderer. In the dawn take his trail and bring him in alive!"

The Colonel still couldn't believe the Navajos would attack the position of mighty Ft. Defiance. Riggs felt like laughing, and would have, had the situation been less fraught with tragedy. He ran to the barracks, getting the balance of the command onto the walls.

He started for the east side himself, now that the officers were up and taking over in the general alarm. As he neared the steps to the east wall over the roofs below a gray dimness stirred under the narrow porch.

"Joe?" Normine called his name with choking sweetness of worry.

He came in against her, his arms reaching down to encircle her slender body, his lips meeting hers.

"Joe, be careful," she told him. "You've avoided me, too."

"I had to keep away lest I cause your position to become more intolerable than it is. Normine, the Colonel isn't ever going to like me for a son-in-law."

"I must talk to you as soon as possible, Joe."

"I'll manage it some way," he replied, and tore himself loose to get up on top.

ALL of the men were quiet around the walls, not moving any more than necessary. A lieutenant crouched, staring over into the velvet blackness. Easing to the edge Riggs tried to pierce the gloom around the fort. The closing of the gates obviously caused the Navajos to change their plan of attack.

Or, as time continued without incident, had there really been only a few skulkers about? Riggs pondered that possibility. He wasn't going to appear so well if such proved the case.

The low hoot of a prairie dog owl tensed him against the wall. Natural or from a human throat? He couldn't tell immediately, not until farther out another joined in. For a moment the pair seemed to be fussing. And once more silence out of the night. The second imitation was not perfect. Riggs grinned to himself in satisfaction. He had been right.

This was an attack.

The lieutenant asked, "What do you make of it, sergeant?"

"Navajo signals, sir."

"Hmm, pass the word," he said to the man beyond him, "to go on the alert. The beggars are moving in on this side."

Presently scurrying sounds of much movement echoed from the ground near the base of the walls. This definite sign of their presence brought tense expectancy. The attackers bereft of the element of surprise did not hurry. There was delay for a purpose, revealed at midnight. No out-pouring of war whoops, just a sudden night alive with men close by pouring at the base of the walls. Movement could be seen, dark shapes in the darker gloom.

Notched poles were slammed against the walls. Farther out a blaze of guns broke the darkness apart. The rattle continued, carrying also some arrows that fitted high and came down behind the walls. All this covered the assault up the walls.

The troopers returned the distant fire until savage heads wearing war caps came up almost over the mud projection of the thick walls. They shot them down, leaned over to pour lead into the very faces of the climbing Navajos. The extensive night became a bedlam of fighting. Finally war whoops rang out about the fort.

There must be literally hundreds of the Indians, Riggs guessed, from the number who tried to gain the fort. The attempt gradually extended all the way around except over the high arch of the sally-port. It was desperate, bloody fighting from the outside. Still, the Navajos tried for all of two hours before giving up for the time being.

The fire from the attackers ceased with abruptness. As the troopers gradually left off themselves, the dullness of the black night seeped once more over the fort. Numerous sounds continued to echo from below. In the dawn's first glow the answer to that came when only the blood marked ground showed. The

dead and wounded had been carried away.

Since daylight created a different set of circumstances, the troopers were pulled down except for a token force. In relays they were fed and sent to the barracks. It was hoped the attackers were departing the vicinity and there was some talk of opening the sally-port for a reconnaissance in force.

Until a trooper who exposed himself carelessly brought the prompt erupting of rifles. They missed him, but the fresh outbreak showed the Navajos still around. As the day wore on they even came in closer, sending in bullets occasionally.

The day was hot inside the fort. By middle afternoon mounted Navajos appeared beyond rifle range, so many at least five hundred must be in the besieging force. Viewing them from the guard towers, the Colonel fumed until his cheeks purpled.

"It's impossible that those savages are foolish enough to think they can actually hold us inside the fort!"

Riggs heard him, and walked hurriedly elsewhere. Late in the afternoon the mounted Navajos approached recklessly and daringly inside rifle range trying to cause troopers to expose themselves. These sallies gained nothing to either side.

Riggs didn't have a chance to seek Normine alone. He was busy between hastily snatched rest periods organizing for the defense that night. The Navajos would have some new scheme. It was not their way to keep trying plans that failed. Unlike other Indians they were inventive, especially at warfare.

Sure enough, after the blackness of night they closed down on the fort under its protection. Except for ragged fire nothing important occurred until after midnight. A lookout reported strange glows well hidden several hundred feet beyond the fort. Two minutes later a weird cry rattled on the air, repeated all around the fort.

SUDDENLY balls of flame shot straight up into the sky. They arched at the peak, descending towards the fort revealed as fire arrows. The fall whipped the head encrusted shredded bark containing pitch gum into a large ball of fire. The arrows descended in a cloud over the fort, striking everywhere. Behind the first wave came a second, then a third. The fast burning flame could not be stamped out, and there was insufficient water. The arrows were thrown over into the center of the compound to burn out.

The roofs were packed with hard adobe so that actually there was little chance of setting them afire. The third shower of arrows was followed by another try at gaining the walls. The Navajos poured at the fort with their notched poles again. So many men busy tossing the arrows into the compound afforded the attackers a better opportunity. This time a handful did gain the roofs of the buildings on the west side.

A quick dispatching of reserves fortunately turned the tide quickly. By two o'clock in the morning this most serious assault on the fort had been definitely repelled. A major sent for Riggs. He found the Colonel also present in the office.

"We've got to break out," the major told Riggs. "Our water is gone."

The Colonel lifted his head toward Riggs. He growled, "It's unthinkable a band of renegade savages could actually keep us inside!" His eyes flashed fire. Riggs wondered if the Colonel in his frustration held him responsible for their present straits.

Riggs didn't think it possible they could get a troop of cavalry through the sally-port. The besiegers would have already prepared an ambush in case of such a try. It would likely be what they wanted. Riggs had in mind an old section of the wall which could be broken through. With a force outside it might even be possible to lift the siege. Colonel Egglesby got to his feet.

"You take a patrol of twenty men," he ordered. "Break through before light. Make no more than one try at dispersing the Indians before you head for Ft. Faulteroy for aid."

"Yes, sir," Riggs saluted smartly, and departed.

There was work to do and that fast. Gathering men he went to the northwest corner of the outside wall. They worked through to a thin layer of mud and stone. Clouds scudded the sky in the pre-dawn. Long ago the scattering shots had ceased.

Riggs completely broke out a section of the wall to reconnoiter when a captain came to him. Riggs looked through

the small opening, immediately jerking his revolver. But it was Hosteen Tso. Widening the break, Riggs permitted him to enter. Hosteen Tso said he had tried to get inside the previous night.

"Where are their camps?" Riggs asked quickly.

"No Navajos near the fort," replied Hosteen Tso. "This time morning they go to their camps. Eat, and come back again after daylight."

A few short questions gained Riggs the information the largest camp was just behind the knoll containing the cemetery. He would try his single assault there.

"Take ten more men," the captain ordered. "If you start them running I'll be out the sally-port to finish the job in front!"

A few minutes delay while ten more troopers flung saddles to horses. The troopers came into position. Riggs with the help of bystanders broke out the remaining section of the wall. He went through first in this ticklish situation, led his horse ten yards and halted. Hosteen Tso was right. No Indians near.

The troopers followed in the blackness. But already a dull gray was lightening the world. Into saddles they went, riding at a walk around the south side of the long knoll. The bright blazes of campfires came into being when they gained the open ground, perhaps three hundred yards to the north.

Riggs kept moving, wide of the camp and the hobbled horses about it. He maneuvered his men in a thin line on the west and north side of the Indian camp, then swung them forward at a walk in the steadily growing light. Riggs moved ahead of the others, verging in to where he could distinguish features of brown skinned Navajo warriors. One lifted up from a meat roasting fire, his gaze shooting straight at Riggs. For a bare breathing space his face mirrored a ludicrous expression before the cry of alarm welled in his throat. Riggs fired, the signal for the troopers to go into action.

THERE were at least a hundred Navajos in the camp. The charge behind roaring rifles, then revolvers drove them into utmost confusion. Apparently believing this was outside help for the fort, the Navajos broke and fled southward. Few took time to arm themselves. Fewer yet made the attempt to unhobble a horse. Those who did, died as the troopers charge crashed over the camp. Riggs yelled an order, and wheeled his men in hot pursuit. The Navajos dodged in every direction, always in headlong flight.

Bugles blared in the fort. Riggs pulled his troopers back from the very edge of wooded defiance plateau, swinging towards the fort. A troop charged into the northeast. The captain swept out of the sally-port, over-riding a hastily manned ambush in the washes below. Riggs didn't bother to join him. He took his men in, within the hour came the recall bringing in the others. The lifting of the siege was complete.

"Your charge unexpectedly on the main camp did it, Sergeant," Major Moorman commented.

"It was still a tight spot if they'd turned on us, sir," Riggs replied.

Amid the bustling activity of the new day, the happiness over routing the Navajos, Riggs went tiredly up the row of officers' living quarters. Colonel Egglesby met him near his own door.

"Come in!" he exclaimed, not seeming near so mad about anything now. His voice lowered as Normine entered the front room to stand near him. "Sergeant, I take it your intentions are to remain in the army?"

"Yes, sir. Such were my plans."

"Hmm! Not going to be led into some commercial venture later on?"

"Sir, I realize this part of the West is going to boom with settlers and industry when the railroads move West after the war between the States. I think, too, that in the building up of this wide, vast country of the Rockies, the army will be needed more than ever."

"Correct. Hrumph!" The Colonel turned towards the door of the other room.

Normine moved nearer Riggs, her eyes studying him brightly.

"Why didn't you tell Father General Carleton recommended your Lieutenant's commission?" she asked.

"That makes a difference? As a son-in-law sergeant-major, it's no go, but as an officer?"

"Even there you do not understand," she replied. "Joe, the fact that you intend to make the army your career does."

(Concluded on page 103)

"Expectin' the Sheriff, are yuh?" asked the man with the gun

Stagecoach Yuletide

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

HALF an inch of snow was on the ground and a flurry of it in the air when the stagecoach left Split Peak, the county seat, for the mining camp of Rangecrest early in the afternoon of the day before Christmas.

Hank Bangs, the veteran reinsman, was driving, and Adam Cramer was his shotgun guard. The usual schedule was for the stagecoach to reach Rangecrest about nightfall. Up a few grades to the summit of Skyhigh Pass, then down a few grades on the other side, and Rangecrest would be reached in time for any Christmas Eve celebration those on the stage might wish to attend.

There were three passengers for the trip. One was Doc Donnely, the elderly physician of the mining camp, who had been to Split Peak to get medical supplies. The second was Mrs. Irma Jennings, a middle-aged widow who had

A White Christmas Is Almost Spoiled by Blood on the Snow!

been to the county seat to visit her daughter. And the third was Jim Lane, popularly known as "Happy," a fat and jovial drummer who covered the territory regularly from the largest towns to the smallest camps.

The stage had been delayed a couple of hours at the start. With the sheriff and his principal deputy away from the county seat on a chase of some sort, Pete Swartz and Vic Finley, notorious outlaws, had decided the moment auspicious to descend upon the town, rob the bank and take what they wanted from the principal store.

Courageous citizens had exchanged shots with the outlaws, whose visit had taken the town by surprise. It was believed that one of the raiders had been wounded while riding from town. In the excitement, Hank Bangs had been unable to round up his passengers to leave with the stage on time.

Now, as the four horses pulled the stage along a level stretch of road at a good rate of speed, Hank and Adam Cramer sat on the box, bent slightly against the storm that was commencing to sweep down from the pass.

"Wind's freshenin'," Hank Bangs suggested.

"Got a bite in it, too," Cramer added. "Snow flakes are gettin' thicker and finer. We may be in for it, Hank."

"Be all right if we can get over Skyhigh Pass," Hank replied. "Won't be any drifts on the downgrade."

"Wish it'd come on a blizzard, after we get to Rangecrest, and Pete Swartz and Vic Finley would get caught in it. They knew danged well the sheriff was gone. They've got some friend in Split Peak who tipped 'em off, I betcha."

" 'Twouldn't surprise me any," Hank admitted.

"They shot Eddie Burke, the bank cashier, in his left arm. Not bad, the sawbones said. Got away with considerable cash."

"Sam Garch, the blacksmith, swore he hit one of 'em as they were ridin' away. Hope he did," Hank said.

"Our passengers are comfortable," Cramer reported, after looking down through the slit in the box. "Happy Lane is tellin' his jokes, and Mrs. Jennings and Doc Donnely are laughin' at him."

HANK BANGS tooled his team and coach around a sharp curve, and they began the ascent of the series of grades that led to the summit of Skyhigh Pass.

Suddenly, as if on signal, the wind began rushing at them, the scattered snowflakes turned into swirling clouds of fine snow and sleet, and the blizzard that had sent these forerunners of its appearance began howling up among the peaks in the distance.

The light faded until the gloom of dusk seemed to be surrounding them. Adam Cramer put aside his shotgun and lit the two coach lamps on the ends of the box. Inside the coach, Happy Lane, the jovial fat drummer, lit the lamp in a corner and remarked with a laugh that it wouldn't seem like Christmas without a blizzard.

"I timed it just right to get to Rangecrest for Christmas," he told the other two passengers. "I like the camp—nice, friendly people there. More like a real home than anywhere I know. My home's where I hang my hat. Goin' to settle down some day with a nice wife, if I ever can coax the right woman into marryin' me."

Happy kept up his running talk, putting in a joke or funny story frequently, getting smiles from old Doc Donnely, and now and then a hearty laugh from Mrs. Jennings, the latter being his particular aim. When pretty Mrs. Jennings laughed, her entire face lit up, her eyes sparkled, and her teeth were revealed in two even white rows.

Up on the box, Hank Bangs and Adam Cramer had pulled down the earmuffs on their caps and pulled their thick mufflers up over their faces to their eyes. They were driving directly into the storm at the time, and the sleet and fine snow, driven by the raging wind, cut like flying needles.

"I'll be glad when we get through," Cramer said.

"This here is nothin' to some storms we've gone through," Hank reminded him.

"Yeah, but I—I don't feel right good."

" 'Smatter?"

"Gotta pain in my stomach. Makes me feel right sick all over," Cramer explained.

"Yuh ate too much pie at the Split Peak Café, account of that blonde waitress workin' there."

" 'Twasn't the pie," Cramer protested. "I ain't been feelin' well in the stomach

for several days. Think I'm goin' to be sick."

"Well, we're carryin' old Doc Donnely this trip," Hank reminded him. "He'll fix yuh up, if yuh get bad."

The horses were laboring up the grade in the face of the storm, and finally reached the top. Hank let them walk for a distance as a breather, then got them into a trot again where the road was level. As they came to the bottom of the second grade, which led to the summit of Skyhigh Pass, the blizzard increased in fury.

"It'll be better when we get over the top," Hank yelled at Cramer above the roaring of the wind.

Adam Cramer did not answer. Hank glanced at him. In the flickering light from the lamps on the box, he saw that the shotgun guard was bent over double and holding one hand to his stomach.

"I'll stop when I get to the summit, Adam," Hank told him. "Doc can dose yuh up till we get to town. That overhangin' cliff is a good place to stop. Give the horses a rest, too, before we start downgrade."

At the top of the pass, time and the elements had long before scooped out dirt beneath a wide overhanging cliff and formed a natural, roofed wide balcony about a hundred yards long. Some brush grew there, but otherwise the floor was solid rock for the greater part, level, a place that could easily accommodate a dozen vehicles as large as the stagecoach.

As the horses fought up the grade and the men on the box bent their heads against the storm, the blizzard increased in fury. Hank Bangs was glad when he could turn his horses off the trail and beneath the overhanging cliff, where the strong wind did not strike them and only a few of the needle-like particles of snow and sleet penetrated.

The horses welcomed the stop. Hank wrapped the reins around the whip stock and turned to find Adam Cramer doubled over and groaning.

"Doc!" Hank yelled through the slit in the box. "Cramer's bad sick. Will yuh do somethin'?"

THE coach door was opened, and both Doc Donnely and Happy Lane emerged, bundled against the cold. Mrs. Jennings remained in the coach. They got Cramer down from the box and carried him back beneath the overhanging rock roof and stretched him on the ground in the uncertain light cast by the coach lamps.

Doc began his work of questioning and examination, asking for his medicine case, which Hank got out of the coach for him. Happy Lane walked around, slapping his arms around his body to induce better blood circulation.

Hank watched Doc Donnely prepare a dose of medicine with water from the coach's canteen and give it to Cramer.

"Food poisonin'," Doc announced. "This'll make him sick for a coupla minutes, but it'll ease him. I'll give him better care when we get to Rangecrest."

"Put him into the coach," Hank ordered. "I don't need him on the box tonight. Only reason he's ridin' tonight is that he wanted to spend Christmas in Rangecrest."

"We won't be spendin' it there if we don't get goin'," Happy Lane warned.

"Only one bad place," Hank reminded him. "That narrow spot quarter of a mile ahead. Snow may drift there, or a slide happen. Once we're past that, it'll be downgrade where the wind will keep the snow blown off the trail."

The wind gave a furious blast, and then came a lull. And during the lull they all heard an ominous sound—a rumbling that increased in intensity, then a roar and a crash. Hank Bangs looked at the others in the faint light.

"Slide," he announced. "That does it! Road's prob'ly blocked ahead, and it'll stay blocked till the storm's over and we can get busy with shovels."

"Have to go back to Split Peak, then," Happy Lane said.

"Easier said than done, Lane," the reinsman told him. "We can unhitch and get the coach turned, and hitch up again. But the grades we just drove over are drifted by this time, and the horses couldn't make it. We're caught here."

"Cramer should get to town," Doc Donnely said, his voice low. "I don't like the way he's actin'."

The medicine had made Cramer violently ill, and now he was weak and almost helpless, and in whispers was complaining of the pain.

Happy Lane had the solution. "Build a fire—biggest we can," he said. "Plenty of dry logs and brush here under the ledge. They'll see the blaze back in Split Peak, see the glare of it through the storm and know somethin's wrong."

"Then what?" Hank asked.

"You can bet that the sheriff is back in town by this time. Before we left, somebody had ridden to tell him about Pete Swartz and Vic Finley robbin' the bank and store. The sheriff will get through to us with some men."

"I'll get the axe off the box," Hank said.

Doc watched over Cramer. Happy Lane began gathering dry brush back under the overhanging cliff. Hank got the axe and began chopping at the stunted trees among the brush at one end of the ledge.

In a manner of speaking, Happy Lane took charge of the situation, except administering to the sick Adam Cramer. He ran to the coach and explained to Mrs. Jennings what had happened, making jokes about it.

"I arranged all of this on purpose," he told her. "It gives me a chance to spend a few hours longer in your charming company. I'll bet you never spent another such Christmas Eve. You'll remember this all the rest of your life."

Doc had propped Cramer up in a corner of one of the seats, and Mrs. Jennings was holding a bottle for him. Now she gave the bottle back to the doctor and turned to Happy.

"I believe I'll get out and get some exercise and fresh air," she said.

"Plenty of fresh air, and exercise can be had for the wantin'," Happy replied.

He walked back under the cliff with her. Hank Bangs was busy unhitching the horses and leading them back as far as possible, out of the wind.

"Mr. Cramer seems dreadfully sick," Mrs. Jennings said to Happy Lane.

"Stomach," Lane explained. "Doc will fix him up."

"But we may have to stay here for some time."

"Maybe help will come if we build the fire," he told her.

LEAVING her where the wind was not strong, Happy hurried to help Hank. The latter had disposed of the horses and was busy with the axe again. Happy heaped the brush and started a blaze, and tossed upon it the wood Hank was chopping. Whipped by the wind, the flames shot up to turn the flying snow and sleet into crimson, and reflect on the clouds above.

The wind drove the heat of the fire back under the overhanging cliff. Happy Lane led Mrs. Jennings there, where she could sit on a rock, and Hank brought a horse blanket from the coach and wrapped it around her.

Doc left the coach and came past the fire to the others.

"It'll be better if we carry Cramer back here where it's warm," he announced. "I've got him some easier, but he's still in pain. Hope we can get him to town before long."

They carried Cramer back near Mrs. Jennings and made him as comfortable as they could. Hank and Happy continued tossing fuel on the fire, cutting the stubby trees and quantities of dry brush from beneath the rocky overhang.

The storm continued, roaring over the pass and descending upon the low country. Mrs. Jennings lost her usual buoyancy and became glum.

"What a miserable Christmas Eve," Happy Lane overheard her say.

"You can celebrate Christmas Eve wherever you happen to be," he declared. "I've got an idea."

He hurried to the stage and got upon the box and went over the top of the vehicle to the snow-encrusted boot, calling to Hank Bangs to help him. Happy had a couple of small sample cases in the boot, and they got the cases out. After a deal of whispering, Hank tossed down a couple of express boxes, too.

Happy was chuckling as he carried his sample cases to a small evergreen tree near where Mrs. Jennings was sitting. He opened the cases and began hanging things on the tree—gaudy toys, a mirror with a gilt frame, some flashy cheap jewelry, a couple of pipes, neckties.

"Who says we can't have a Christmas tree?" he asked.

"A few bites of food would help more," Doc Donnely told him, chuckling.

"Oh, we're arrangin' a Christmas Eve feast, too," Happy explained. "Watch Hank."

Hank Bangs had broken open one of the cases, and now used his axe on the second.

"Good thing we had these along," he said. "It's express stuff, but I reckon this here is a life-savin' emergency. Won't be any howls about it, anyhow."

"What yuh got, Hank?" Doc asked.

"Well, sir, this was some fancy grub a mine owner ordered for the church and school doin's this evenin'. Since it can't get there in time for the party, we'll use

it ourselves."

He put out boxes of crackers and fancy cookies, cans of fine sardines and other fish, a cheese richer than that usually on sale in Rangecrest, cans of fruit, raisins and dates and dried figs and boxes of candy.

"Help yoreselves," Hank invited. "We've got a roarin' fire, a Christmas tree and stuff for grub. The horses are safe back under the cliff and we're safe here."

"And Cramer is a lot better," Doc Donnely called to the others. "He's almost too weak to hold up his head, but he says the pain ain't so bad. That's what I'm glad to hear."

They began eating. Happy Lane carried food and fruit and candy to Mrs. Jennings, and tried to cheer her up with his ready witticisms. Hank threw more fuel upon the fire, then picked up the axe to cut more wood.

And off the trail and into the midst of the unusual Christmas Eve scene rode two snow-encrusted men on horses almost exhausted.

They were like snow men as they got clumsily out of thir saddles. One reeled and clung to a stirrup, and the other moved forward, pulling off a glove.

"Hey, is that you, sheriff?" Hank Bangs called. "Did yuh see our fire?"

The man nearest straightened and pulled down his muffler with his left hand—and pulled out a gun with his right.

"Expectin' the sheriff, are yuh?" he asked. "Reckon he won't be able to come to the party. You've got us instead."

THEN those around the fire and Christmas tree realized that Pete Swartz stood before them, and that the man with him was Vic Finley, that two desperate outlaws on the run had entered their haven beneath the overhanging cliff.

"Be sensible!" Pete Swartz warned them. "Don't make me do any shootin'. I won't hesitate about it if any of yuh make a wrong move. It's Doc Donnely I'm after."

"You want me?" Doc asked, nervously.

"Yeah. Somebody plugged Vic as we rode outen Split Peak. Bad shoulder wound. We knew yuh were takin' the stage, Doc, and tried to get ahead and stop it. But we had to do a mess of circlin' around, and the stage got ahead of us. Then we saw the fire and knew yuh had to hole in here."

"Landslide ahead," Hank remarked.

Vic Finley had lurched away from his horse to sink to the ground and prop himself against a rock. Pete Swartz motioned for Doc to go to him. Doc cut away some of Finley's clothing to get at the wound.

"I'll want some water," he announced, immediately. "Hank, get somethin' we can melt snow in."

"I'll go right along with yuh, Hank," Swartz informed him. "I don't aim to give yuh a chance to get the guard's shotgun and blaze away at me with it. What's the matter with yore guard?"

"Sick in his stomach," Hank replied.

"He'll be sicker, and some of the rest of yuh, if yuh try anything funny. You!" Swartz directed the last word at Happy Lane.

"Yeah?" Happy asked.

"I know yuh. You're that smart aleck drummer as is always tellin' funny stories. Heard yuh in town a few times. I reckon yuh can make yoreself useful. And before we're done, I'll take your money and cuff links and diamond shirt stud. Come with me to get somethin' to heat water in."

"Bucket under the box," Hank Bangs told the outlaw. "Use it to water the horses."

Happy went with Swartz to get the bucket. The outlaw got Cramer's shotgun, too, and hurled it far out into the swirling storm. Happy filled the bucket with snow and put it on the fire to melt.

"How's Vic?" Swartz asked Doc Donnely, stopping beside him.

"He's lost a lot of blood. The wound isn't bad," Doc replied. "I'll clean and dress it. That's all I can do, except give him somethin' to ease the pain."

"Can he ride?"

"He can, if he can ride with a bandaged left shoulder."

Swartz faced Hank again. "What made you folks think I was the sheriff when I rode in?"

"Thought I recognized yore horse as the sheriff's," Hank lied.

"Used this fire as a signal, huh, as well as to keep yuh warm?"

"We were hopin' it'd be seen in Split Peak, and that maybe somebody would come to see what was wrong."

"It'd take 'em hours to get here through the storm, even if their horses

could make it," Swartz declared. "Reckon me and Vic will get good and warm, and have some of these fancy eatin's before we pull out." He looked at Mrs. Jennings. "Who're you?" he asked. "Seems I've seen yuh somewhere."

Happy Lane spoke up. "She's Mrs. Jennings, of Rangecrest, and there's no need for you to frighten her."

"Let the lady speak for herself," Swartz warned. "Can't see that it's any of yore put-in. I can use them rings she's wearin'. Know a girl who might appreciate 'em."

"I'm a widow," Mrs. Jennings told him. "These are the engagement and wedding rings my husband gave me. Surely, you wouldn't take them."

"Sure I would! Hand 'em over, if yuh don't want me to strip 'em off yore fingers myself."

Happy took a quick step forward, but did not take a second when he saw that Swartz' gun was covering him and that the outlaw's eyes were glittering like those of a killer about to shoot.

"You stay back, Fatty," Swartz warned him.

He walked up to Mrs. Jennings and held out his hand, and she stripped off her rings and passed them to him. Swartz put them into a pocket of his coat.

SWARTZ had them helpless. Hank Bangs did not carry a gun, for it was the custom for stagecoach drivers to go unarmed when they had a guard beside them on the box, just as it was the custom for a highwayman never to fire at a driver unless he showed fight. The guard was another matter.

Doc Donnely was not armed. Vic Finley, the wounded outlaw, had a six-gun in his holster at his hip, and kept his right hand on the butt of the weapon, ready to draw and fire if necessary. Happy carried only a derringer, and just now he was not carrying it, having left it in his carpetbag.

Swartz investigated the food and began eating, carrying some over to the wounded Finley.

"We'll take it easy here till Finley gets a little strength," Swartz told them all. "Then maybe we'll be ridin'. If any of yuh do the wrong thing, there'll be some shootin' before we go. Vic will be all right when I get him to our hideout. And the storm will cover our tracks, I reckon."

Happy Lane strolled over beside Mrs. Jennings, who was weeping softly over the loss of her rings. He sat on the ground beside her and began devouring candy. Swartz glanced toward them as he strutted around arrogantly, but did not seem to consider either of them dangerous.

"I'll get those rings back for you, Mrs. Jennings, if it's the last thing I ever do," Happy declared.

"Don't try anything foolish," she warned in a whisper. "These outlaws are desperate. They'd shoot you down without a moment's hesitation."

"But for him to take your rings—"

"It can't be helped, I suppose. But I think so much of them!"

"That outlaw may get careless," Happy said.

"Please don't do anything rash," she begged, as he handed her the box of cookies from which they were eating. "My rings aren't worth your life."

He looked at her fondly. "I've known you for four or five years," he said. "That is, I've known who you were, and seen you every time I made Rangecrest on my rounds. I remember when your husband died three years ago. Know how you're doin' dress-makin' and millinery and bakin' fancy cakes for parties and weddin's to get along—"

"People have been good to me," she said. "They've all helped me."

"Me, I'm just a fat drummer always good for a laugh," Happy Lane told her. "But I've got ideas. I've saved quite a lot of money—and I'm tired of runnin' all over the country talkin' storekeepers into buyin' my goods. I want to settle down. I could buy the store in Rangecrest. Wilkins, who owns it, he's gettin' old and wants to go live with his son in Denver."

"Yes, I've heard him say that often," she admitted.

Happy bent his head and would not meet her eyes. "I—that is, I think a heap of you," he confessed. "If I was in business in Rangecrest, say, and we saw a lot of each other . . . I mean, maybe you might get to like me a little, huh?"

"I know a lot about you," she told him, frankly. "I know everybody seems to like you. I—I don't blame you for wanting to stop traveling and settling down."

"I might have a chance with you, then?" he asked.

"Only time can tell that," she replied. "Let's not talk about such things now. That terrible Pete Swartz—"

Swartz was ordering Hank Bangs to cut more wood for the fire, complaining that it was not warm enough under the cliff. He went over and asked Vic Finley how he felt. He warned Doc Donnely to get Finley on his feet as soon as possible.

HAPPY LANE got up from the ground at Mrs. Jennings' feet and bowed and offered her a box of candy. Their eyes met and something in Happy's made her gasp, and it wasn't love light, either.

"You're going to try something—I know it," she whispered. "Please don't risk it."

"I wouldn't be worthy of lookin' at you if I didn't," Happy told her. "Swartz isn't watchin' me much. He thinks I'm harmless, a little fat man like me, always makin' jokes and tellin' funny stories. It's Hank Bangs, the tough stage driver, he's keepin' an eye on most. You just sit still."

He gave her the box of candy and stepped aside.

"Doc!" he called.

"Yeah?" Doc Donnely asked.

"You got any whisky in your medicine bag? Mrs. Jennings thinks she's gettin' a chill."

"Yeah, I've got a flask. Always carry it," Doc called in answer.

"I'll come get it."

Happy ignored Mrs. Jennings' whispered plea that he make no move against Pete Swartz. He started to walk past the fire and get to the spot where Doc was caring for the wounded outlaw.

Swartz had heard what Happy had said, and it sounded reasonable. He was watching Hank throw more brush on the fire, and was doubly cautious when the stage driver picked up the axe and went toward another tree.

It was the proper moment for Happy Lane's move. Doc was at the side of the wounded Finley, bending over him and fussing with a bandage. He nodded toward the bag on the ground at Finley's side.

"Flask's in the bag," Doc said. "Right at this end in a pocket."

[*Turn page*]

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"Thanks, Doc. My own flask is empty," Happy told him.

He knelt on the other side of Vic Finley and groped in the medicine bag and finally extracted the flask.

"That's it," Doc said.

Happy glanced quickly past him to see Swartz watching Hank Bangs carefully. Happy started to get to his feet, and seemingly stumbled and lurched. He toppled against Vic Finley.

There was a sharp blow, a brief tussle. Then, before Vic Finley could give a cry of warning, Happy Lane had knocked him aside and had jerked the gun of the wounded outlaw from its holster.

He sprang away from Doc and Finley just as Swartz heard the commotion and turned. Swartz saw the gun in Happy's hand, and threw up his own weapon.

Two shots sounded as one.

Happy Lane felt a streak of fire across his upper left arm, and saw Pete Swartz drop his gun and reel aside and fall. Before he could gather himself together and try to reach the gun, Happy was upon him, clubbing him with the weapon he held, and Hank Bangs, shouting, was running toward them.

"Help me hold him a second, Hank," Happy said, panting. "I want to get Mrs. Jennings' rings out of his pocket."

In an instant, he had the rings and had stepped back.

"Doc, fix up this one, too," Happy called. "Hank, you get a coupla ropes, so we can tie up these hellions."

"Oh, Happy, are you hurt?" Mrs. Jennings cried, hysterically.

"Only a scratch. Won't even leave a scar to brag about," he called in answer.

Hank hurried for a rope. Doc helped him tie Finley so he would be helpless. Then Hank watched while Doc worked on Swartz' wound, dressed and bandaged it, and helped Hank tie his wrists and ankles afterward.

Happy Lane had gone over to Mrs. Jennings, bowed, and returned her rings. Her eyes were glowing.

"Glad to get 'em for you, Mrs. Jennings," he said.

"I—I think, Happy, that you may begin calling me Irma," she whispered.

"I'll come back and call you that in a few minutes." He called to Donnely.

"Doc, when you've got time, you might stick a little court plaster on my arm," he suggested.

Later, the two outlaws were propped up side by side, with Hank standing guard over them, holding Swartz' gun. Doc was carrying Finley's. Adam Cramer was almost free of pain and was half asleep. And Happy Lane was sitting beside Irma Jennings, feeding her cookies and candy, holding her hand a little at times, and suggesting that she take what she wished off the Christmas tree.

And so the sheriff and a search party found them a few hours after daybreak.

DARK COMES THE NIGHT

(Concluded from page 94)

"How did you know about this possibility of a commission? Maybe it won't come through."

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "General Carleton told Father he received word it was coming through. Likely in the next dispatch from the States. I'm sure it is already in Albuquerque."

He touched her gently, his face serious. "Normine, life is hard on army wives in these remote posts of the West. You—you still would try it?"

"We're Army," she said calmly. "And you're still my sergeant-major, no matter if you get to be a general!"

He lifted her carefully in his arms. Outside the first call to colors sounded in brassy notes from a bugle. He nodded his head. "We're Army, even here at Ft. Defiance," and kissed her.

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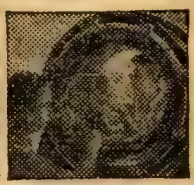

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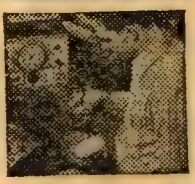

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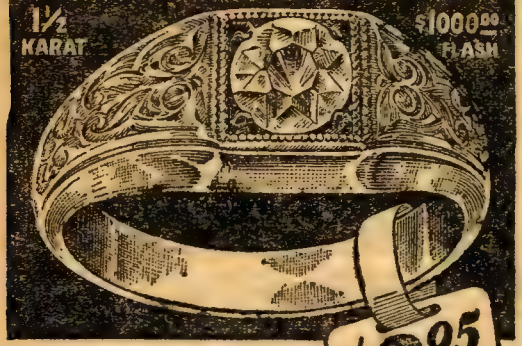

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 10)

in Indian Territory where he lived for five years with the Osage Indians. He learned everything they could teach him and it stood him in good stead as a law officer. When he left the Indians he went to Liberty Hill, Texas, and set up in the horse-raising business. Six horse thieves came down on him one hot night and rode off with twenty-five head—and that was really the start of his career. He trailed those men across the staked plains, up the Pecos River to Magdalena, and, thence, over half the state of New Mexico. Though it took him a year, he caught up with them. When the smoke cleared away he took the two survivors to a long stretch in jail and went home with seventy-five horses. But the dead thieves had relatives and several of them tried to even the score.

It was about that time that Hughes joined the Rangers, after much urging. As a Captain he always insisted that his men be gentlemen; he even recommended church-going to them and was himself, for several years, a Sunday School superintendent at Ysleta. He treated all men courteously and often tempered justice with mercy. Many a hard case owed a fresh start to the helping hand of John R. Hughes. He was a great man, and a good one.

A Saga of Brave Men

John R. Hughes was a brave man, but there were many brave men in the West during its wild and turbulent days. Had there not been, we would not have any West today, that is, we would not have a great and prosperous section where people can live in safety. It would still be the vast wilderness that it once was, and which men like John R. Hughes wrested from the wild and uncivilized, lawless elements.

It might be recorded that there were brave men on the side of the lawless as well as on the side of the law, and many an outlaw in facing death showed bravery that would make other brave men respect him although they might hate his very shadow.

The bravery of men facing death is shown by the stories of two cowboys, who were more or less pawns in the great Lincoln County Range War in which Billy the Kid played an important part. These two cowboys were Billy Morton and Frank Baker.

A man named Tunstall had been killed by a posse led by Billy Morton, sent from Lincoln to attach some horses owned by the victim. There was no justification whatever for the murder. The posse took the horses unopposed. With great difficulty Tunstall's

foreman, a man named Brewer, and Billy the Kid, having learned of the approach of the Morton party, had persuaded their employer that it was not safe to stay at the ranch. It took them hours to bring his stubborn mind to accept this, and even then he was not at all convinced. He had not injured any of these men. Why should they want to do him personal injury?

The posse pursued. When Brewer and young Billy saw that cloud of dust in the rear they knew what it meant. Again the obstinate streak in Tunstall dominated him. He refused to run away. His companions left him hurriedly, and as soon as the pursuit reached him he was shot down.

A Time of Tension

The killing of Tunstall was like setting a match to a powder magazine. Feeling ran so high that it was even dangerous to be a neutral. Armed men rode the streets of Lincoln watching one another with wary, smoldering eyes.

[*Turn page*]

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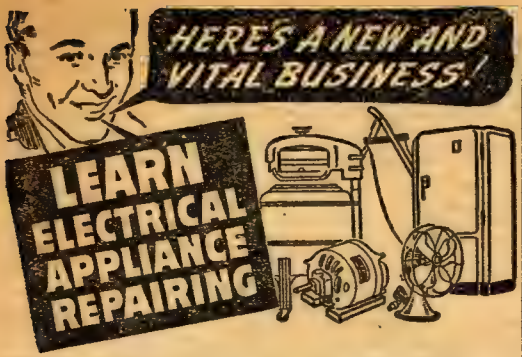

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The friends of the dead Tunstall struck swiftly and savagely, but they moved under some faint color of law, as did most of the ruffians during this bloodthirsty campaign. This faction was known as the Murphy faction, and as the Sheriff was friendly to this faction Brewer had himself appointed as a deputy, formed a posse which included Billy the Kid, and went after those who were in the posse at the time of the killing of Tunstall.

The posse rode far before it located its game. Well down the Pecos Valley it jumped Billy Morton and Frank Baker. The two men fled, holed up in a dugout, and stood off the Brewer gang until their ammunition was exhausted.

Then, under a promise of safe conduct to Lincoln, they surrendered.

Both Morton and Baker were practically sure that the promise would not be kept. The captives knew that they had to pay a debt of vengeance.

Farewell Letters

The party spent the night at the Chisum Ranch, and here both men showed their calm nerve in facing death. Both wrote letters of farewell to relatives. The letter written by Morton happened to be preserved. In it he discussed quite coolly the probabilities, told his version of the trouble, gave information as to what property he had and what disposition to make of it, and then signed himself, "Yours Respectfully."

There was not even a suggestion of fear in the remarkable document. It was as quietly written as though he were describing something in which he was only casually interested. Though he knew he was marked for death he faced the fact with imperturbable courage.

There was a girl at the ranch, John Chisum's niece. Baker left his watch with her, to be sent to his sweetheart. Morton shook hands with her before he walked out to climb into the saddle. Miss Chisum knew as well as he did that this was the last ride he would ever take, but there was nothing she could do about it.

In a canyon, on the way to Lincoln, the two prisoners were shot to death and here occurred another brave deed. An Irishman named McCloskey, who should never have been with the posse, being a friend of Morton, intervened and tried to keep the posse

from killing the prisoners and was himself killed for his pains.

Buckshot Roberts

Another example of extreme bravery and accuracy of shooting while facing great odds, and practically certain death, was the case of Buckshot Roberts. He was a little rancher who lived on Ruidoso creek. He had been a soldier and a Texas Ranger, and his nickname had been given him because he still carried in his body so many leaden souvenirs of past engagements. He was of no great importance in the community. Nobody gave his opinion or his personality much weight. He was not outstanding in any way, except in the hour of his death, when he fought a most desperate battle against overwhelming odds.

Fourteen men rode up to the agency at Blazer's Mill one day and found Roberts there. They had come to get Judge Bristol, but not finding him there, these "regulators," as they called themselves, contented themselves with Roberts. The former foreman of Tunstall, Brewer, and Billy the Kid were the leaders.

The killers closed in on Buckshot. He fought back, coolly, steadily, with amazing bravery. Standing there in the open, shot through the stomach at the first fire, he wounded three of his assailants. So steady was the blaze of his rifle that the "regulators" broke and fled for cover.

The ex-Ranger retreated into a cabin, bolted the back door, and dragged a mattress to the front door. Behind this he lay with his own rifle and an old Sharp's buffalo gun which he had found on a rack. He stood off the whole force of gunmen for hours.

Exasperated at so stubborn a defense, Brewer with an oath said: "I'll get him myself."

Brewer crept up, by a roundabout way, to a pile of saw logs nearly two hundred yards away from the cabin. His first shot at Roberts missed. Again he raised his head from behind a log to take aim. He fell back dead, struck by a bullet between the eyes. The besieged man, wounded to death, burning up with fever, still indomitably game, had focused his whole strength and mind on that one shot!

With Brewer dead, the killers quit, quit cold. Billy the Kid and his desperadoes rode

[*Turn page*]

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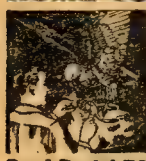

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away and left the field to the dying man. Buckshot Roberts had been too much for them.

The War Went On

The next day the little Texan passed away, but the Lincoln Range War went on, on and on until many more men were killed, until the leaders were killed off, until citizens grew weary of so much bloodshed. A semblance of law and order finally manifested itself and the better citizens began liking the new order of things. The law in itself, as shown through that great struggle, was in most cases corrupt. Many of the lawmen were little better than the outlaws and gunmen. But eventually law and order was restored to a section where lawlessness and gunplay had run rampant.

Men like Billy Breakenridge, Jeff Milton, and John R. Hughes fought relentless battles in helping to tame the West, and were instrumental in creating the grand place the West now is, and that is why we say of the last of these noted Western characters to ride on to the great beyond, John R. Hughes: "Sleep and rest in peace forever. Your knowledge of right, your courage and your guns left us a great heritage, one we will never forget, nor will we forget you." *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

CAPTAINING a wagon train bound for Santa Fe, the Rio Kid is called upon to use every bit of his vast knowledge of the West and his skill as a gunman and leader of men in SANTA FE TRAIL, by Tom Curry, a broiling, colorful novel of pioneer days featured in the next issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN.

The wagon train had trouble with Indians and the elements from the start. Then, after a powerful man named Webb Daggett was rescued from the torture of a band of Comanches and nursed back to health, internal trouble broke out and spread through the train.

The Rio Kid suspected that Daggett was behind the trouble, but until the man came into the open with the boast that he knew where there was gold to be had for the taking, suggesting that the settlers follow

him to get rich, the Rio Kid was not certain.

At this point, however, the Rio Kid saw clearly that Daggett was guilty of trying to divert the wagon train from the Santa Fe Trail for some nefarious purpose of his own, and he told the settlers so.

The gold fever had taken them, though, and only a few were willing to abandon the idea of becoming rich over-night. And so, with the destiny of the wagon train hanging in the balance, Daggett and his aides played their trump card.

With the men gathering around, "Uncle Hy" Reiner began to accuse the Rio Kid in a shrill voice, pointing at him with a crooked, shaking forefinger.

"He done it! I seen him!" piped Reiner. "He thought I was snoozin' but I watched him slip my poke from my pack. There's eighteen hundred in it."

"Yuh're loco," said the Rio Kid. "Yuh've been soppin' it up again, though where yuh got it I don't savvy." The liquor supply had run low several days before and there were only a few quarts left, conserved for emergencies.

Pryor sensed trouble and quickly sized up the men backing Reiner, who was in a state of nerves. One was "Fullhouse" Watts, gambler and shirker of work, but another was Silas Gregg, honest and upright. Two were drovers who had been in the poker game that evening. Two more were serious, hard-working family men and friendly to the wagon train captain.

"I can't believe this, Rio Kid," said Gregg soberly. "Reiner woke me and told me what had happened. I saw you crossing over and you stopped to speak with 'Steelhide Cass.'

"He come down the line, busted up the

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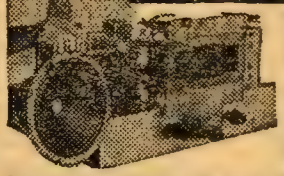

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game and then slipped near me and stood for a minute to make shore I was asleep," Reiner went on. "He stooped and got my wallet and then hustled on around the camp. I didn't dare say anything for fear he'd kill me."

"Yuh're lyin', Reiner," growled the Rio Kid. "At best yuh've made a mistake. I'm no thief and didn't touch yore money."

Fullhouse Watts spoke, his voice a challenge. "Like Reiner says, Pryor may gun me for what I'm goin' to say but I got to tell it. We were playin' cards when the Rio Kid busted up the game. He roughed me some and I was on my way to turn in when I happened to glance back. Pryor was squattin' by old Reiner. The light wasn't too good but I'm shore he took somethin' from Uncle Hy's pack."

"I seen the same thing," declared a drover, who had been in Fullhouse's party.

The Rio Kid thought fast. He recalled how the spat between the poker players had drawn him that way. Now Watts and his cronies were accusing him of theft. It looked like they'd set him up for a cold deck.

Another man chimed in, a strong young fellow who had always backed the Rio Kid. "I saw what Gregg did. The captain walked past my wagon a while ago, that's all."

The majority waited, confused, unwilling to believe such a story about their leader. So far Reiner had been corroborated only by rather disreputable members of the train.

Webb Daggett pressed forward. "Perhaps there's been a mistake." The tall man spoke mildly. "It might have been someone who looked like the Rio Kid. To tell the truth I was lyin' under Tate's wagon and I was awake. I saw a feller I thought was the captain speak to Watts, then move to where Reiner was bunked. Surely if he's innocent the Rio Kid will let us search him and see he hasn't got the wallet on him."

Pryor shrugged. "Go to it. Only stand back, Daggett, and you too, Watts. Let Shannon do the searchin'."

All trusted Galusha, the father of beautiful Sari Shannon. He stepped in and carefully checked the contents of the Rio Kid's pockets. Pryor had a wallet but Uncle Hy shook his head.

"That ain't mine. Maybe he hid it in his packs."

"Look in them," ordered Daggett.

Galusha Shannon stooped and emptied the

nearer saddle bag. A well-worn leather pocketbook fell out and Reiner gave a cry. "There it is! I told yuh so!"

A gasp ran through the gathering.

Shannon was astounded and his bearded jaw dropped. It was a terrible moment and Webb Daggett's carefully controlled voice picked up the stunned silence:

"Yuh mustn't blame him too much. Any hombre yuh meet will weaken once in a while. Maybe the trek wore out our captain, who's no better than the next. He figgered he could sneak out Reiner's poke and lay it to someone else who don't set up to be a tin idol. He slipped for a moment, that's all."

"Dry up, Daggett," said the Rio Kid, as his enemy obviously was serving only to further condemn him by these weak excuses. "That wallet was planted in my bag." Yet even as he said it he realized how feeble the words were. Every man so trapped offered the identical alibi.

Fullhouse Watts smiled in derisive triumph and Daggett seized the whip hand. In the

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rear of the gathering a couple of Watts' bunch stealthily drew revolvers.

Steelhide Cass threw up his cocked carbine. "Hold it! I'll drill the first man who aims a gun."

And that, folks, is just one of the many thrilling episodes you'll find in SANTA FE TRAIL, the featured story in the next issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN! It's a humdinger of a yarn that you'll enjoy mightily—and it's packed with thrills and action from start to finish!

Also in the next issue, another of those grand Injun-fightin' tales by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. Called THE WAGON SOLDIER, it concerns the heroic fight put up by the soldiers of Fort Perilous against overwhelming forces of attacking redskins, and in particular "the action above and beyond the call of duty" displayed by one Miles Boone, sergeant, and a member of the sometimes underrated legion known as wagon soldiers.

This is a corking good yarn filled with a high suspense and a group of down-to-earth characters. If THE WAGON SOLDIER doesn't carry you away to the frontier outpost that was Fort Perilous and set you down to fight beside as salty an army outfit as you could ever hope to meet, we'll trade our typewriters for a brace of slightly used tomahawks and pursue our viewpoints from there.

All the regular departments will be found in the next issue, of course, as well as the usual batch of gun-slamming short stories. For reading with the feel and flavor of the old West—the sounds and smells, the thrills and chills—look forward to our next issue!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

IF YOU'VE got anything to say regarding the magazine, be it good or bad, here's where you say it, pards. Your letters serve as a poll which enables us to determine the type of stuff you'd like to see in future issues. And don't think we aren't appreciative of all your cards and letters! We like to hear from everyone, young or old or middlin'.

Take this lad from down Virginia way, for instance:

I am a boy of ten years old and have been reading THE RIO KID WESTERN for over a year. Sure did enjoy KING OF THE HIGHWAYS, by Lee E. Wells, in the August issue. But I like GOLDEN EMPIRE the best, which appeared awhile back. I like all your stories, though, so keep 'em coming.—*George Nelson, Jr., St. Charles, Virginia.*

You and the rest of these folks keep readin' 'em, George, and we'll keep 'em coming. Don't worry about that.

I've just read my first RIO KID WESTERN and think it tops any other Western magazine I've ever read.—*Vernon Breitkreritz, Cuero, Texas.*

Thank yuh kindly, Vern. And you didn't overstate the facts a bit. No sir, not a bit. Yet I suppose there's folks who'd figure our views a bit on the biased side, but then you know folks. There's all kinds of 'em.

Have been reading Thrilling Publications for about a year and my favorites are THE RIO KID WESTERN, THE MASKED RIDER WESTERN, RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, and TEXAS RANGERS. I think SILVER OF SATAN and SHIFTLESS MAN, in the June issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN, were about the best two stories I've ever read.—*Calvert Morrow, Linden, Texas.*

Glad you like our magazines, Cal. Keep lookin'. We've got some stuff coming up in future issues that you're going to like fine.

Who you tryin' to kid? If your magazine reflects the spirit of the old West, then I'm a monkey's uncle.—*Ben Netzorg, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Could be, Ben. Could be!

I've been reading THE RIO KID WESTERN for several years. I particularly enjoyed SILVER OF SATAN in the June issue, since I live on the Carrissa Plains in the San Luis Obispo country and the story was set around San Luis Obispo. Hope to keep on reading your magazine for as long as you publish it.—*Donald P. Freeborn, Santa Margarita, Calif.*

How old are you, Don? What we mean is, can you hold out for that long? 'Cause from the look of things we're going to be publishing the Rio Kid's adventures for a whole lot of moons to come.

For some time now I have been a reader of THE RIO KID WESTERN Magazine. I think it's swell. If the featured novel doesn't always strike my fancy, the short stories and fact features are sure to. I particularly like the biographies of famous Westerners, and think The Bunkhouse, by Foghorn Clancy, is tops.—*Donald Gweley, Newman, Georgia.*

Thanks, Donald. And that's about all the excerpts from your letters for this issue. Be back with more next time. And if you haven't written to us before, all you do is drop a postcard or letter to The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Though space limitations allow us to print only a few of your letters, you can be sure we appreciate them

Adios, amigos, until next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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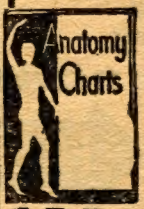

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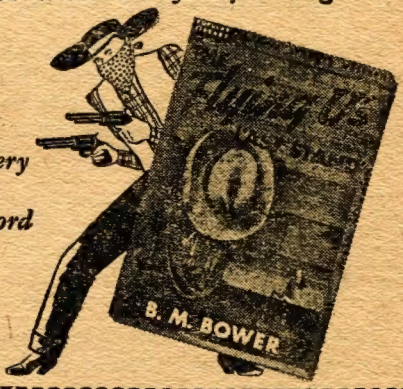

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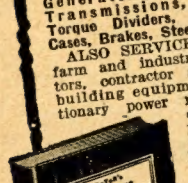

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